An Investigation of the Listening Strategies Used by Second-Year EFL Students at Biskra University

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résumé

Many Algerian students find it difficult to understand the spoken language because listening is a highly complex process during which they have to construct meaning out of information provided by the speaker. Their difficulties include decoding words or sentences, poor knowledge of the structure of the language, lack of prior cultural knowledge, inferring abilities and the use of listening strategies. In fact, successful listening requires the integration of a range of strategies: cognitive strategies, meta-cognitive strategies and socio-affective strategies. This study aims to investigate the listening strategies used by second-year EFL students at Biskra University. For this purpose, a questionnaire was administered to seventy participants. In addition, to make the findings of this study more reliable, the think-aloud method was used with eight participants. The results of the two research instruments revealed that most of the participants use few strategies and need help to acquire listening skills. Hence, it is suggested to teach them listening strategies to enable them to minimize listening obstacles and to maximize strategy orchestration.

الملخص:

تجد مجموعة كبيرة من الطلبة الجزائريين صعوبة في فهم اللغة الانجليزية المتكلمة لأن عملية الاستماع عملية صعبة تتطلب بناء المعنى من خلال المعلومات المقدمة من طرف المتكلم. ومن الصعوبات التى تواجه الطلبة فهم الكلمات والجمل، عدم التمكن من الجانب اللغوي، نقص في المعلومات التى تخص الجانب الثقافي للغة وكذلك استعمال استراتجيات الاستماع، يهدف هذا المقال لبحث استراتجيات المستعملة من طرف طلاب السنة الثانية بجامعة بسكرة، استعمل لهذا الغرض نموذج استطلاعى لمجموعة من الطلبة متكونة من 70 طالا، كما اجربت الطريقة الاستقرائية مع 8 طلبة لتأكيد النتائج، تدل النتائج على أن المشاركين بإمكانهم استعمال استراتيجيات قليلة وهم في حاجة إلى اكتساب مهارات تمكنهم من السمع الحسن، لذلك يستحسن تدريس الطلبة لاستراتيجيات السمعية لتمكنهم من تطوير إمكاناتهم في هذا المجال.

Introduction:

Although listening is vital for learning, it has remained the most ignored of all language skills in our department. Research has shown that adults spend 30 to 40% of communication listening, 25 to 30% speaking, 11 to 16% reading and about 9% writing (Rivers, 1984). The critical role of listening has been supported by researchers emphasizing its primacy in instructional methods (Dunkel, 1991; Feyten, 1991). However, due to the complicated nature of listening comprehension and the fact that teachers usually provide students with aural exposure without teaching them how to listen, they face numerous problems.

Speech rates, decoding words or sentences, poor knowledge of the structure of the language, lack of prior and cultural knowledge, inferring abilities and the use of listening strategies are common problems encountered by listeners. We are going to focus on listening strategies in this study because we believe they can enable listeners to comprehend and cope with listening problems. As claimed by Wenden (1986), less successful learners used fewer strategies, less frequently, compared with more successful ones, while Van and Abraham (1990) found that unsuccessful learners were also active strategy users but used the strategies less effectively.

This study aims to investigate the listening strategies used by second-year EFL students at the University of Biskra, through a questionnaire and the think- aloud method, assuming that their

listening problems lie in the use of few listening strategies and that they need to be taught how to listen effectively. O'Malley *et al.* (1885a) have pointed out that continued advances in learning strategy research should permit students to learn L2 through more efficient through classroom instruction. The present study also seeks to contribute to the understanding of the listening strategy instruction and further to assist students become more effective listeners.

1. Listening and Listening Comprehension

Listening was considered as a passive, receptive skill in language learning. Students used to be exposed to listening texts focusing on words in order to develop a better pronunciation based on the audio-lingual method. The role of listening was recognized only in the early 70' by the work of a number of researchers including Krashen (1982) who saw it as a key factor in facilitating language learning. In his theory of language acquisition, he indicated that an increase in proficiency can only be acquired where exposure to the target language really entails comprehensive input for the learners.

This means that students should be able to understand the essence of what is being said or presented. He believes that the best activities for classroom are those that are natural, interesting and understood (ibid.). Similarly, littlewood (1984: 59) considers that the ideal input for acquiring a second language is similar to the input received by the child, comprehensible, relevant to his immediate interest, not too complex, but not strictly graded either.

Listening is an unobservable mental process not easy to describe. As defined by oxford (1990:206), "listening is a complex problem-solving skill and it is more than just perception of sounds. Listeners engage in a variety of mental processes in an effort to comprehend what they are exposed to".

They focus on selected aspects of aural input, construct meaning and relate what they hear to existing knowledge. This is confirmed by Vandergrift, 1999: 168) who states that listening comprehension is an active process in which the listener must discriminate between sounds, understand vocabulary and grammatical structures, interpret stress and intonation, retain what was gathered in all the above and interpret it with the immediate as well as the larger context of the utterances. In addition, Sampson and Allen (1995: 78) state that listening is a transactive process that involves many processes such as receiving, focusing, discriminating, assigning meaning, monitoring, remembering and responding to auditory messages.

From these definitions, we can deduce the important role of short term memory and long term memory as explained by Channot (1995:16) "the concept of listening is a cognitive process in terms of stages where information in the form of sounds reaches the listener's auditory or visual receptors, and is then filtered through the listener's short term memory, working memory and long term memory". Finally the listener selects and interprets information in order to understand.

Most of these definitions stem from a cognitive point of view which means that it is an active skill that requires a great deal of effort on the part of the listener.

According to 0' Malley et al. (1985: 19), "listening comprehension is an active process in which the listener constructs meaning by using cues from contextual information and from existing knowledge while relying on multiple strategy resources to fulfil the task requires. This means that listeners follow a complex cognitive process and use a set of strategies to understand oral messages. In order to achieve this, two kinds of cognitive processes may be used: the bottom up and the top-down. On the one hand, the bottom up process involves constructing meaning from the smallest unit of the spoken language to the largest one in a linear mode (Nunan, 1998). In this case, the listener starts building up the meaning of the oral texts starting by decoding sounds, words, phrases and then sentences relying on grammatical relationships as well as stress and intonation. On the other hand, the top down process refers to the interpretation of meaning as intended by the speakers by means of schemata or structures of knowledge in the listener's mind (ibid.).

This shows the importance of the listener's background knowledge in making sense of the message or the text heard. Listening as a process should involve the combination of both bottom-up and top- down processes and requires the listener's conscious use of strategies to be successful.

2. Listening Strategies

Many researchers provided definitions for learning strategies. According to Wendel (1991:18), "they are steps or operations that learners use to learn a new language and to regulate their efforts to do so". Oxford (1999:518) defined "learning strategies for second or foreign language learners as specific actions, behaviours, steps or techniques that students use to improve their own progress, developing skills in a second or foreign language. These strategies can facilitate the internalization, storage, retrieval, or fuse the new language". Macaro (2006; 325/327) gave a more comprehensive definition "a learning strategy is a conscious mental activity, or action that has been initiated by a goal and is measured against a learning situation. Second, a learning strategy is tied to a specific situation but should be transferable to other learning situations.

Third, a number of strategies need to be orchestrated together so that a learning goal or task can be accomplished. This means to combine different strategies to "create a cycle of strategy development that promotes a greater depth of interaction with the text and results in more successful comprehension (Vandergrift, 2006: 485). Strategies used in learning in general and listening in particular are means used by learners who attempt to improve their various skills. Vandergrift (1999) showed that strategy development is important for listening training because strategies are conscious means by which learners

guide and evaluate their comprehension and responses. These definitions show us the importance of strategies in language learning.

O' malley (1990) claimed three types of strategies: cognitive, meta-cognitive and socio-affective. According to Derry and Murphy (1986), cognitive strategies are behaviours, techniques or actions used by learners to facilitate the acquisition of knowledge or a skill. These strategies can be further divided into: inferencing, elaboration, imagery, summarization, translation, transfer and repetition. Cognitive strategies reside in the working memory and facilitate the central executive jobs of processing information and passing it from one process to another (Macaro, 2006). Meta-cognitive strategies are management techniques by which learners control their learning via planning, monitoring, evaluating and modifying their learning approaches (Rubin, 1990). Learners use meta-cognitive strategies to oversee comprehension and the transfer of information verifying that learning tasks are successful. Socio-affective strategies have been defined by Chamot, Kupper and imprink Hermandez (1988) as those strategies that involve interacting with another person to assist learning or using affective control to assist a learning task.

The former includes asking question, acting cooperatively and being aware culturally while the latter is related to things such as anxiety reduction, self encouragement and self reward. Acquiring learning strategies allows learners to become more autonomous, capable of monitoring their own learning by using effective strategies

in accomplishing various tasks either in learning or in real situations. Thus, an awareness and development of effective listening strategies becomes a necessity in language learning.

3. Listening Strategy training

Strategy training or development is defined as teaching explicitly how, when and why to apply language strategies to enhance students' efforts to reach language programme goals. Two types of strategy instruction can be identified: direct instruction and embedded instruction. In direct instruction, learners are presented with listening activities and shown how a certain strategy can help them develop their listening comprehension. On the contrary, in embedded instruction, learners are provided with selected activities structured to elicit the use of required strategies, but are not informed about that (O'Malley and Chamot, 1990; Wenden, 1987).

A number of researchers have argued that listening ability can be trained (Anderson and Lynch 1988:8/18; Ko, 1992: 99). Rubin (1990) demonstrated that listening can be trained and foreign language learners can benefit both affectively and linguistically from training in listening. Among many researchers who investigate the effectiveness of the use of listening strategies, we can mention Bacon, 1992 a; Goh, 2002 a/2002 b and Vandergrift, 1998, 1997, 2003. They investigated listening strategies in a comprehensive way, examining the use of three types of strategies and showing how important they were in the development of students' listening competence.

Tompson and Rubin (1996) also tested the effectiveness of listening comprehension and found that listening strategy training has positive effects on listening comprehension performance. Teaching both cognitive and meta-cognitive listening strategies can help students improve their listening. Many other researchers such as Lu Chang Hong (2001) attempted to prove that some EFL students' difficulties in listening comprehension are due to improper learning strategies. Therefore, this calls teachers to train students in using appropriate listening strategies.

4. Method

4.1. Participants

A total of 70 second year students who registered during the academic year 2010/2011 participated in this study. All of them were from the same area and have the same educational background.

4.2 Instruments

The instruments used in this study were a questionnaire and the think aloud protocol. The questionnaire contained two parts. The first one elicits personal details while the second one was adapted from Strategy Inventory for Language Learning worked out by Oxford (1993). This consisted of 20 items related to listening comprehension.

A four-point likert scale ranging from 'strongly disagree' to 'strongly agree' was used to indicate students' preferences. The items measure the use of listening strategies and the processes underlying

three factors regulating listening. These factors include cognitive strategies (i.e. linguistic inferencing, taking notes, summarizing), metacognitive strategies (i.e. planning, monitoring, a paying attention and evaluating) and socio-affective strategies (i.e. motivation, anxiety and cooperation).

The think aloud method was used to collect data from three sessions at one week interval. The participants listened to a listening comprehension activity during which they were interrupted and asked to report what they were thinking. This was recorded by them as all the sessions took place in the language laboratory.

5.1Analysis of the Results

5.1 Findings from the Questionnaire

5.1.1 Listening Strategies Often Used by Learners

As displayed in the table below, the results of the questionnaire indicate that the respondents often use only three cognitive strategies: taking notes, using imagery and prior knowledge. They also use one social strategy: working with peers. To my great surprise none of the metacognitive strategies was often used in spite of their positive effects on the development of learners' listening comprehension skills.

Item No.	Strategy Set	Rank	Mean	Standard Deviation
5	I take notes to help me remember	1	1. 92	.74

13	When I work with other students, it helps me successfully to complete the task.	2	2.25	.89
18	I use imagery	3	2.32	.71
16	I use my prior knowledge	4	2.39	.94

5.1.2 Listening Strategies less frequently used by learners

The least frequent strategies used by the respondents include two cognitive strategies: summarizing and capturing the main idea and neglecting the details which are important. Among the most important metacognitve strategies, guessing the meaning of words according to the context and trying to keep up with the rate of speed of the speaker, often used by proficient listening, are less frequently used by most of the learners. In addition, what is noticeable is that affective and social strategies were not given importance due either to the ignorance of the effectiveness of such strategies or because of the neglect of the listening skill in learning in the Algerian context.

Item No.	Strategy Set	Rank	Mean	Standard Deviation
6	I summarize what	1	3.22	.94

	I listen to remember			
12	I capture the main idea and drop the details that are not important	2	2.79	.79
10	I use the context of the text to help me guess the meaning of the words I do not know	3	2.67	0.92
1	I try to keep up with the rate of speed of the speaker	4	2.51	0.82
7	I am more confident of my ability to understand when I check what I have I try to keep up with the rate of speed of the	5	1.58	0.96

	speaker understood with others**.**			

5.1.3 Listening Strategies not used by learners

Some of the most important metacognitive strategies facilitating listening comprehension, such as relaxing before and during listening, setting goals for the listening task and deciding not to think in Arabic are not used by the respondents. In addition, all the respondents were unaware of the use of writing diaries in spite of their importance in language learning. Moreover, the most surprising thing is that they do not pay attention to stress and intonation considered as very important cognitive strategy in the understanding of speech. Using cues, a compensation strategy, is also not used. This allows us as a researcher to say that some of the most listening strategies, mentioned in the table below, used by proficient listeners were not used by the respondents in this study.

Item No.	Strategy Set
8	I reward myself when I do well
2	I try to relax and breathe deeply
9	I pay attention to stress and intonation to understand better
17	Before I listen I decide what information I need to successfully complete the task

15	I tell myself not to think in Arabic
14	When I can keep for myself the goals for a task, I find it easier to extract information from the text.
19	I write a language diary
20	I use linguistic clues to understand
11	I develop cultural understanding

5.2 Findings from the Protocol Analysis

From an analysis of the think-aloud protocols, five listening strategies emerged including the same ones recorded from the questionnaire (table 1) in addition to guessing which was used when learners were unable to understand the meaning of some words. Moreover, we can also note that they also tend to use clarification from their peers but not as often as the other strategies mentioned before. The frequency of the occurrence of the other strategies is similar to the ones deduced from the questionnaire.

6. Discussion

The data analysis presented above demonstrates that the respondents used less cognitive, metacognitive and socio-affective strategies normally used by more proficient listeners. This is based on the findings of previous studies such as Vandergrift (2003) who examined the types and the differences of the listening strategies used by more and less skilled listeners while they were listening to

authentic texts in French. This study revealed that more skilled listeners tend to use a high level of metacognitive strategies which is not the case of the results obtained in this study. Another researcher, Teng (1998) also investigated the listening strategies used by university students in Taiwan and showed that effective listeners significantly use more strategies than ineffective listeners did in all categories. This implies that the difference lies in the number of listening strategies they employed. This also leads me to assert that the more strategies learners use, the more they can be considered as proficient.

The results obtained support the hypothesis that second-year learners use few listening strategies. This concerns all the categories of strategies including, cognitive, metacognitive and socio-affective. This is evident in the results recorded in the tables above which show that students used very few cognitive strategies. In addition, they seemed to be unaware of the use of metacognitive strategies which can facilitate listening comprehension such as setting gaols before listening and deciding not to think in Arabic. These kinds of strategies among many others can regulate and pave the way for effective listening. Summing up, learners in the Algerian context need to be trained in listening comprehension courses. This can allow them to gain awareness of the importance of strategy use and develop their listening competence.

Conclusion

This study has provided us with insights into the listening strategies used by learners in an Algerian context. This has been done for the purpose of identifying an important area which needs to be widely investigated because many learners have problems in understanding oral texts. This also intends to stress the need that listening strategies can be taught in order to help learners develop their listening competence and thus become more proficient listeners. Strategy instruction can be embedded into daily lessons so that it becomes an integral part of the regular class routine. In developing materials that may enhance learners listening strategy use, teachers may rely on, for example, on O'Malley et., al (1985a) who provided a set of strategies among them, grasping the main idea, key-word strategy, selective attention, using contextualized clues, grouping, inferencing, elaboration, self-monitoring, imagery and prediction. The Strategy Inventory for Language Learning worked out by Oxford (1990) can be of great help in selecting the strategies to be developed; they include both cognitive, metacognitive and affective strategies that need to be acquired by any second or foreign learners and mainly those belonging to the Algerian context.

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