

Comparative and Comprehensive Analysis of Strategy Training Listening Processes on Improving Learners' Listening Proficiency

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Abstract

Over the past two decades, listening comprehension strategy has become one of the most significant topics in second language acquisition research. Researchers, such as O'Malley and Chamot (1995), Oxford (1990), Thompson and Rubin (1996) and Vandergrift (1997, 2003), along with many others, have examined a wide variety of hindrances connected to L2 listening strategies acquisition. Most of the discussions focus on variances between more and less effective listeners, listening strategy instruction and assessment of listening strategies. Although the effectiveness of explicit teaching listening strategy on improving learners' listening proficiency has been proven across a range of settings, (Clement, 2007; O'Malley and Chamot, 1995; Ozeki, 2000 and Thompson & Rubin, 1996) most studies have focused on examining the outcome of the strategy instruction, based on pre- and post-test designs. Based on learners' listening needs empirical research is done to develop appropriate strategy instruction based on learners' listening needs. Very few studies have addressed L2 listeners' perceptions of listening strategies and strategy instruction. This research paper gives elaborate background information related to the subject and investigated the influence of Strategy Training Listening Processes instructional techniques on the listening comprehension development of L2 learners.

Keywords: Listening, writing, note-taking, ELL.

Introduction

Listening is the most widely used and exploited language skill, many researchers complain that it has long been neglected and not treated as a separate skill until recent decades (Field, 2002; Morley 2001; Nunan, 2002 and Rubin, 1994). From a narrower, institutionalized point of view, the importance of teaching listening comprehension depends on the aims of each language program. Listening comprehension could be taught for the exposure to the sounds of English, for interaction with speakers of English, or for listening to lectures in English (McDonough & Shaw, 1993). Because listening to lectures is one of the major learning channels in English-medium universities, (Benson, 1994) it should be the focus of instruction in programs preparing students for such academic endeavors.

The role of listening as a foundation for Second-Language Acquisition (SLA) is also essential. Listening provides easily processable input for all four levels of second language learning (Peterson, 2001 and Rost, 2002). Beginners, even young learners who cannot read and write well, can establish a foundation for productive skills by listening. At intermediate and advanced levels, students can increase structural accuracy and vocabulary knowledge by listening. Thus, it is emphasized that listening is the primary channel for language acquisition. Therefore, the development of listening as a skill is important in second language learning. In spite of the importance of listening, both as a source for SLA and for learning content in academic settings, there seems to be relatively little research which examines the nature of academic listening (Ferris, 1998). Nonetheless, this chapter synthesizes the literature on the process of listening comprehension, the teaching of listening comprehension, listening comprehension strategies, language learning strategy research, and the instruction of listening strategies.

The Process of Listening Comprehension

Listening has been characterized as a complex process that allows us to comprehend articulated language (Rost, 2001). In order to understand the complexity of listening, one must examine the process of listening comprehension strategies, comprising the types of information involved in listening, bottom-up and top-down processing views of listening comprehension, interactional and transactional functions of language use and the nature of real-life listening.

Listening comprehension has begun to be seen as an active process rather than a passive process because “listeners actively process and interpret information” (Mendelsohn, 1995). The listener not only receives the meaning but also recreates it (Rost, 1990). O’Malley and Chamot (1995) point out the cognitive processes involved in listening is maintained and there is a cognitive theory which underlies the processes involved in listening, a theory which was first presented by Anderson (O’Malley & Chamot, 1995). This cognitive theory views language comprehension as a complex process in which learners construct meaning from input. Anderson proposes that comprehension of aural and written texts are similar in nature. He then differentiates comprehension into three interrelated processes: perceptual processing, parsing, and utilization. In perceptual processing, the listener focuses attention on the spoken text and the sounds are retained in echoic memory. In parsing, words and messages are used to construct meaningful mental representations by forming propositional representations that are abstractions of the original message. The size of the unit or segment (or chunk) of information processed depends on the learner’s knowledge of the language, general knowledge of the topic, and the processing information. The third phase, utilization, consists of relating a mental representation of the text meaning to existing knowledge, thereby enhancing comprehension and, most likely, retention of the information presented.

Listening comprehension can also be characterized by the types of knowledge involved. Chamot (1995) explains the types of knowledge employed during language comprehension as declarative knowledge and procedural knowledge. Declarative knowledge includes concepts, vocabulary, and images. Declarative knowledge is stored in the form of propositions and schematic networks. On the other hand, procedural

knowledge, which includes both physical and cognitive skills and strategies, is stored as production systems. Chamot's representation of language comprehension illustrates the interaction between the two types of knowledge via listening: "Listening is a practical skill, which can be used to acquire new declarative knowledge". It is also opinions out that procedural knowledge bring about cognitive skills; thus, cognitive skills need substantial training in order to transport from controlled to automatic processing. Rost (2002) explains declarative knowledge as the 'what' of language learning, involving internalized rules and chunks of language (including vocabulary, syntactic structures, and discourse structures). He states that procedural knowledge, in contrast, consists of knowing 'how' to employ language knowledge, for comprehension and for production. Rost (2002) rank orders the goals of listening comprehension, emphasizing that to achieve first-order goals, the learners must achieve the lower-order goals at least to some extent.

Both terms "bottom-up processing" and "top-down processing" originally came from computer science, and were later introduced to the linguistic field. Bottom-up processing carries the meaning of "data-driven", and top-down processing is known as "knowledge driven" in computer science (Field, 1999). In the second language acquisition field, the terms bottom-up processing and top-down processing are used to describe the cognitive processes of second language listening or reading (Clement, 2007).

Vandergrift (2007) commented that listeners favoured bottom-up processes when they relied on their linguistic knowledge to recognize linguistic elements-phonemes, syllables, words, phrases, sentences to construct meaning. On the contrary, top-down processes work in the different direction, and listeners used context and prior knowledge (topic, genre, culture and other schema knowledge stored in long-term memory) to construct meaning.

A set of alternative terms for bottom-up processing and top-down processing are decoding and meaning building, as suggested by Field (2008). The decoding process starts from the sound components of the target language, such as phonemes and syllables, and then progresses into words, phrases, and sentences. In contrast, the meaning building process requires external information, such as world knowledge, personal experiences or prior knowledge gained in academic situations. Field explained the reason why he suggested a new set of terms. The words "bottom-up" and "top-down" might cause misinterpretations by implying contradictory stances on comprehension. However, research suggested that L2 listeners need to acquire both types of processes in order to successfully complete a comprehension task, depending on the purpose for listening (Mendelsohn, 2001 and Vandergrift, 2004).

Bottom-Up Processing

In listening comprehension, bottom-up processing happens when listeners attend to linguistic features and decode each sound and word for semantic meaning (Siegel, 2011). According to Clement, (2007) in bottom-up processing, the language learners heavily rely on sound input in listening comprehension. In order to guess what a word might be in the listening text, a listener might try to match initial sounds to various lexicons that learner knows and eliminate maximum possibilities until most accurate match to the input sounds is found.

Clement (2007) provided a comprehensible example of how a learner might encounter the new word “founder.” When the learner initially hears the first phoneme /f/, the memory is activated with of possible words that sound familiar, such as find, fact, fan, found, etc. As the learner receives the next sound, he/she then eliminates the words find, fact, and fan, as these words do not match the received sounds anymore. ‘Found’ seems a good match, until the final sound /er/ occurs. Depending on language proficiency, the learner may infer the meaning of the word based on the link between ‘found and founder’. Such an elimination process usually takes no more than 0.25 second, according to Field (1999). Also, the processes of analyzing first phonemes, then progressing into syllables, words, phrases, and even sentences can all occur simultaneously.

Top-Down Processing

Top-down processing is used to resort information if the learners encounter listening input for which there is no prior knowledge and also to compensate for the insufficient knowledge of the language (Wilson, 2003). In top-down processing, the listeners draw upon background knowledge and expectations of the upcoming oral text and then infer what the true meaning of the speaker may have been (Clement, 2007). The representation of such prior knowledge or a generic theory of the subject is also mentioned as a schema.

According to Rost, (2005) schemata (plural of schema) are frequently being developed and updated, and listeners refer to a variety types of schemata that help them interpret the text and predict the outcomes. This knowledge could also assist learners to make sense of the oral text and fill in missing information. In the case of a cultural or intellectual disconnection, learners are able to adjust or incorporate a new schema to facilitate their comprehension. It is worth declaring that listeners may not always appropriately interpret the meaning of the oral text by applying the top-down process. In their systematic review of the role of prior knowledge in listening comprehension, Macaro, Graham (2005) pointed out that listeners’ use of prior knowledge could lead to inaccurate comprehension especially when their interpretation lacked supporting evidence later in the text. However, as Vandergrift (2003) argued, this is the procedure underlying the strategy of questioning elaboration, which involves a combination of questions and world knowledge to brainstorm and evaluate logical possibilities as the interpretation of the listening text continues.

As discussed above, learners use top-down processing when they activate their own background knowledge of the listening text, and they rely on bottom-up to help them decode the sounds and grammatical patterns of English. However, listening comprehension is not either top-down or bottom-up processing. Recent research suggested that the two cognitive processes combined to facilitate listening comprehension because listeners use both prior knowledge and linguistic knowledge in understanding messages (Graham & Macaro, 2008 and Vandergrift, 2004). Thus, the present study took into account the complex cognitive processes and included listening strategies required both bottom-up and top-down processing.

Differences between More and Less Effective Listeners

Although both bottom-up and top-down processing are necessary in listening comprehension, listeners may favour one process over the other depending on the purpose of the listening, the context of the listening task and learners' language proficiency. When learners need to authenticate specific details in the listening text, they will engage in more bottom-up processing. On the contrary, when learners try to comprehend the idea of a listening text, they tend to depend on more top-down processing. Students' language proficiency also impacts their listening process tendencies. The less proficient a learner, the more likely he/she tends to rely on bottom-up processing (Vandergrift, 2007).

Key Terminology

The key terms, used frequently in this research paper, are defined below: Listening strategies: "Listening strategies are conscious procedures to deal with incoming speech, chiefly when the listener knows that it must be compensated if the input is incomplete or partial appreciated" (Rost, 2001). They are generally divided into three broad categories as cognitive, metacognitive and social and affective strategies. "Listening is the mental process of constructing the meaning from spoken input" (Rost, 2002). Listening is divided into three interrelated processes: perceptual processing, parsing, and utilization (Anderson, 1982). In perceptual processing, the listener focuses attention on the sounds. In parsing, vocabulary and information are used to construct meaningful mental representations. The third phase, utilization, consists of relating a mental representation of the text meaning to background knowledge. Thus, the information presented is stored in the memory.

Learning strategies: Learning strategies are "specified activities adopted by the learner to make learning easier, faster, more agreeable, more self-directed, and more convenient to new situations" (Oxford, 1990). Rost (2002) defines a learning strategy as "a mental or behavioral device that a learner employs for the purpose of long-term learning".

As a comprehension skill, listening provides learners with the greatest amount of input during the process of language acquisition and development. Osada (2004) clarifies, listening is a complex process which in fact vital for the language learning. Due to the amount of effort acquire to the learners to listen, which must comprehend what it been said, retain the information in memory, integrated with what is being said and continually adjust its understanding of what its heard in the light of prior knowledge and incoming information. Due to the restricted capacity of operational memory (also known as the Short-Term Memory (STM) part of our memory where information which is received is stored for short periods of time is being analyzed and interpreted. Once the message or information in an utterance is understood the data may become part of permanent memory or (LTM) Long-Term Memory.

Listening strategy instruction encourages learners to focus their attention on the mental strategies they use while listening, to evaluate the relative success of these strategies, and to plan for future listening experiences. Several researches have indicated that higher proficiency learners use more metacognitive strategies than lower proficiency learners (Goh, 1998 and Vandergrift, 2003). In addition, a few initial studies

have explored the effect of metacognitive instruction on listening comprehension, metacognitive awareness, and learner attitudes (Cross, 2011; Goh & Taib, 2006 and Vandergrift & Tafaghodtari, 2010). Despite a small number of empirical studies on the benefits of a metacognitive, process-based approach for listening comprehension, this technique has been supported in large part by anecdotal evidence and qualitative studies (Vandergrift, 2004). In the present study, investigator seeks to provide additional empirical evidence to support mixed method use in L2 listening instruction.

Listening strategy instruction employed through online, audio-visual resources in Research has provided empirical support for the use of audio-visual media in listening instruction, (Vann & Abraham, 1990 and Jones, 2009) an advantage that can be attributed to the cognitive benefits of presenting information in both audio and visual modes. The dual modality of audio-visual media creates more routes to the information, strengthening the mental connections to the materials. Additionally, audio-visual resources provide learners with highly contextualized authentic speech, exposing them to a variety of accents and speakers. This can result in more robust perceptual processes and make it easier for learners to transfer listening comprehension skills across contexts. Finally, audio-visual media itself can be a motivating factor for L2 learners due to its familiarity and its classification as entertainment.

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