Examination of Listening Comprehension Strategies used by Iranian Upper-intermediate and Intermediate EFL Learners

MOGHADAM Reza Nemati
Islamic Azad University, Torbate Heidarieh Branch, Iran
E-mail: rezanemati.dic90@yahoo.com

KOWSARY Mohammad Ali
Hakim Sabzevari University, Iran
E-mail: kowsary.tefl@gmail.com

Received 22.11.2014; Accepted 28.12. 2014

Abstract
The main purpose of this study was to find out the listening strategies used byupper-intermediate and intermediate Iranian FFL learners and to compare the listening strategies of both groups of participants in this study. A total number of 30 Persian EFL learners were administered a listening comprehension test and a listening strategy use questionnaire. The test consisted of two class lectures, each of them followed by comprehension questions comprised of multiple choice and essay questions. After the test, participants were also asked to complete a questionnaire that included 20 items asking about the use of cognitive, metacognitive, andsocio-affective strategies.
The listening test and listening strategy use questionnaire data was run through multiple statistical tests, including factor analysis, multiple regression, and t-tests, to identify the strategies the research participants had used and explain the relationship between listening strategy use and listening comprehension.
The results indicated that both upper-intermediate and intermediate listeners used metacognitive, cognitive, and socio-affective strategies. However, there was some variation in terms of the use of cognitive and metacognitive socio-affective strategies. As far as cognitive strategies were concerned, the results revealed that the upper-intermediate listeners employed more top-down strategies than the intermediate listeners, whereas there were no significant differences in the use of metacognitive strategies. The results also indicated that cognitive strategies are the most powerful predictor of listening comprehension, followed by socio-affective strategies, whereas metacognitive strategies were the predictor that accounted the least for listening comprehension.

Keywords: Listening Comprehension, Upper-intermediate and Intermediate EFL Learners, Listening Strategies

1. Introduction and Background

Listening had been neglected in teaching English as a foreign Language literature until recently. Researchers examined Listening an ability that could be developed without\ assistance, and an investigation into the history of language learning shows this lack of attention to the skill of listening (Chiang & Dunkel, 1992; Morley, 1984; Moyer, 2006; Mendelsohn, 1998; Schmidt-Rinehart, 1994).

However, large proportion of the research findings reveals that listening is the most important skill for language learning because it is the most widely used language skill in everyday life (Morley 2001; Rost 2001), and it expands faster than the three other language skills, which in turn suggests that it can facilitate the emergence of the other language skills (Oxford, 1990).

Most of related studies support the importance of listening and how comprehensible input facilitates the learning of a foreign language. Krashen and Terrell (1984) stated that the priority of listening in foreign language learning is the same as the priority of the listening-only stage a child needs to acquire his/ her first language. Dunkel (1986) also shows that expanding proficiency in listening skill is the key to achieving proficiency in speaking.
The importance of listening in language learning was brought into attention when Gary (1975) claimed that focusing on listening comprehension, especially in the early phases of second/foreign language learning/ teaching, creates four different types of advantages: cognitive, efficiency, utility, and affective.

As Chastain believes (1971), listening comprehension is the ability to understand native speech at normal speed in unstructured situations. Morley (1972) defines listening comprehension as the ability to discriminate auditory grammar and to reauditorize, extract essential information, remember it, and relate it, everything that entails processing sound and construction of meaning.
Wipf believes (1984) listening is a complex mental process that includes receiving, interpreting and reacting to sounds being received from a sender, and finally retaining what was gathered and relating it to the immediate as well as the broader sociocultural context of the utterance. Although, mentioned definitions are different to some extent, but they all consider listening as a mental process that requires a great deal of cognitive effort on the part of the listener such as interpreting the sounds, figuring out the meaning of the words, and activating the background knowledge.
Many Language researchers and language teachers have examined listening techniques using a variety of strategies, including think-aloud procedures (Murphy, 1985; Chamot and Kupper, 1989; O'Malley, Chamot, and Kupper, 1989), questionnaires (Fujita, 1985; Goh, 2002b; Vandergrift, 2002, 2005), interviews (Vandergrift, 1996; Goh, 2002a), diaries (Goh, 1997), and recall task (Moreira, 1996; Schmidt- Rinehart, 1992;). Previous research in language acquisition has considered all the listening strategies: cognitive, metacognitiveand socio-affective. However, as far as the authors of the present study concern, none of the previous studies conducted in this paradigm have explored all of those strategies together.

Many previous researches have also shown that the learner proficiency is one of the main factors that determine the choice of a strategy (Conrad, 1985; O'Malley & Chamot, 1990; Rost & Ross,

1991). Professional learners were found to use more strategies than their less-skilled listeners. Thus, there were many differences in the types of strategies skilled and less-skilled learners used.
The main goal of the present study is to find out the strategies used by Iranian Upper-intermediate and intermediate EFL learners to expand their listening comprehension. The study also seeks to compare the strategies used by these two groups of participants. This study also tries to answer the following research questions:

1. What are the strategies that Iranian upper-intermediate and intermediate EFL learners use while listening to an authentic text in English?

2. Is there any differences between upper-intermediate and intermediate listeners in their perceived use of metacognitive, cognitive and socio-affective strategies?

The research hypotheses are also as following:
1. Both Iranian upper-intermediate and intermediate EFL Learners use cognitive, metacognitive and socio-affective strategies.

2. There is no differences between upper-intermediate and intermediate EFL learners use while listening to an authentic text in English.
Cognitive strategies are some useful techniques that listeners use to handle the learning tasks and facilitate the acquisition of knowledge or skill (Derry & Murphy, 1986).

Metacognitive strategies are management techniques employed by learners to have control over their learning through planning, monitoring, evaluating, and modifying (Rubin. 1987). Based on Oxford (1990), the conscious use of metacognitive strategies helps listenersfind their attention when they lose it. However, learners do not use metacognitive strategies very frequently despite the importance of self- monitoring and self-evaluation.

Although second/foreign language strategy research has developed in this decade, Bacon and Swaffar (1993) believe that the number of studies conducted about listening comprehension is relatively small. Rubin (1994) also believes that despite the development in the second/foreign language strategy research, the research with focus on listening strategies is still very few and limited. Recent studies reporting on the differences in the strategy use between learners have indicated the great role of metacognitive strategies for promoting success in second/foreign language listening, and these studies have also indicated the possibility of instructing learners on strategy use to enhance their performance on listening tasks (Vandergrift, 1997).

2. Methodology

The present article, aimed to contribute to our understanding of listening comprehension strategies in general, and listening comprehension strategies used by Iranian Upper-intermediate and Intermediate EFL Learners.

2.1. Instruments

2.1.1. Questionnaire

The perceived use of strategies and techniques was measured by a listening comprehension strategies questionnaire. The questionnaire was adapted from a combination of questions gathered from two valid studies. The authors of this study have made some adjustments to the wording of a few items to make them fit the language and application of the questionnaire, for example "French" was replaced with "English" in one of the questions.

2.1.2. Listening Test

Although the EFL learners who participated in this study were enrolled at two different language proficiency levels, namely upper-intermediate and intermediate, a listening test was used to find whether there was really a significant difference in their listening achievement. The listening test also served as a listening input on which participants could reflect with regard to their mental strategies while completing the questionnaire items. Since this study is concerned with the listening strategies learners use in the institute setting, the listening test constructed for this study was comprised of two lectures to measure listening comprehension.

The two lectures varied immensely in length and topics discussed. One of the lectures is only three minutes long. It is a listening passage about Internet and its dangers. It was made sure that the lecture did not contain any technical terminology that could make the comprehension of the lecture overly challenging to the participants. The comprehension of this lecture was measured using a test, in which the subtests were comprised of four items with four potential choices, and an essay question that was focused on the recognition of the main idea of the lecture.
The other lecture, is about 10 minutes long, and it is about The World's Oldest University. The comprehension of this lecture was measured using five inferential essay questions that centered on the recognition of the main ideas and key supporting details in the lecture.

2.2. Participants of the study

A total of 30 male students were recruited to participate in this study. The participants were all native Persian speakers. All the participants were in Upper-intermediate and Intermediate levelsin an English Language institute in Mashhad, in Khorasan Razavi Province, Iran. The purpose and procedure of this study and the confidentiality of data collected were explained to all the 30 participants in Persian and English.
The participants were both graduate and undergraduate university students studying in a range of majors including: electrical engineering, mechanical engineering, civil engineering, mathematics, communication, biology, and physics. Fifteen participants were at an intermediate level. The other fifteen students were at an upper-intermediate level.

2.3. Research Procedures

Although the experiment was conducted in several sessions, the same instruments and procedures were used in each session. Each session lasted for about an hour. Two recorded lectures were

played on a CD player twice, and two sets of questions related to the lectures were administered in each session. After having listened to both lectures as many as twice and answered the comprehension questions, participants were administered the Listening Strategies Questionnaire.

2.4. Data Analysis

An independent-samples t-test was conducted to see whether there was a significant difference in the listening comprehension of the upper-intermediate and intermediate groups. Then, the questionnaire data was run through a factor analysis to reduce the collected twenty-variable data into three main factors. After that, the test scores and questionnaire data was run through a regression analysis to see how much of the comprehension variance is accounted for by the questionnaire factors. Finally, the responses to the items were compared between the upper-intermediate and intermediate groups by using an independent samples t-test.

3. Results and Discussion

Since this study tries to compare and identify the listening comprehension strategies used by Iranian upper-intermediate and intermediate EFL learners, the two groups of participants completed a listening comprehension questions and a listening comprehension strategy use questionnaire. In order to find out the relationship between the listening achievements of the upper-intermediate and intermediate groups and the three types of listening comprehension strategies (cognitive, metacognitive, andsocio-affective), the data was run through several statistical procedures. The standard deviations, means of the listening comprehension scores from the upper-intermediate and intermediate groups, the dependent variable in the study, were first calculated.

Table3.1: Means and standard deviation for listening achievement of the advanced and intermediate groups

Group	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Min.	Max.
Upper-intermediate	15	17.06	2.54	11	20
Intermediate	15	13.93	3.01	9	20

Table 3.1 shows the descriptive statistics of the two groups including the number of participants in each group, the standard deviations, means, and the range of minimum and maximum scores of listening comprehension for the upper-intermediate and intermediate groups.

3.1. Listening Comprehension Test Data

Our first assumption was that the upper-intermediate group would significantly outperform the intermediate group on the listening test. Therefore, as a first step, the scores of the listening test for both the upper-intermediateand intermediate groups were run through a two-sidedindependent samples t-test to see whether there was a statistically significant differencein the listening achievement of the two groups. First, an examination of Levene's test of equality of error variance showed that the data collected from the listening comprehension test of both groups had homogeneity of variance; therefore, the error of variance of the listening achievement was equal across groups (F = .060; p = .809). It is noteworthy that for all analyses reported below, the alpha level for significance was set at .05.

As shown in Tables 3.2, 3.3, and 3.4, the t-test results revealed that the upper-intermediate group had significantly outperformed the intermediate group on the listeningcomprehension test, with a mean difference of 3.13, t value = 3.07, and p value = .005. Therefore, based upon these test results, a conclusion can be drawn that there is a statistically significant difference between the listening achievement of the upper-intermediate and intermediate groups, suggesting that our assumption was confirmed.

Table 3.2 displays the number of participants in each group, the means and standard deviations of the listening comprehension test for the upper-intermediate and intermediate groups

Group	N	Mean	Std. deviation	Std. Error Mean
Upper-intermediate	15	17.06	2.54	.66
Intermediate	15	13.93	3.01	.77

3.2. Questionnaire Data

The first hypothesis was that both upper-intermediateand intermediate learners would use cognitive, metacognitive and affective strategies. In order to test this hypothesis and answer this question, a questionnaire consisting of listening comprehension strategies was used. Correlation coefficients revealed the associations among the listening comprehension strategies and their subcomponents, such that highly correlated dimensions of the strategies could be identified.

The first factor, cognitive, which accounted for 24. 24% of the total variance, was indexed by 8 items in the present study. All the items loaded positively with the first factor, except item 1, which had a high negative correlation. The data indicates that each item was highly correlated with this factor, with coefficients ranging from -.757 to .821. This finding suggests that the cognitive factor is an important subcomponent of the listening comprehension strategies questionnaire.

The second factor, metacognitive, was represented by 8 items and accounted for13.41% of the total variance. The Data shows that questionnaire items that were highly correlated with this factor, with a range in coefficient of -.763 to 722.

The last factor, socio-affective, was represented by 4 items, and accounted for11.25% of the total variance. Four variables loaded on factor 3, and they all correlated positively with factor 3, with a coefficient ranging from 601-704. It is interesting that all the strategies had such high correlations, and this indicates that the majority of participants reported using these strategies.
To sum up, the results related to our first hypothesis demonstrated that both advanced and intermediate learners use three types of listening comprehension strategies: cognitive, metacognitive, and socio-affective, suggesting that our first hypothesis has been confirmed.

3.3. Multiple-Regression Analysis

In order tofind out the relationship between the scores and our threefactors, and to find which of the factors contributed the most to the listening achievement of the upper-intermediate and intermediate groups. So, the data was run through a multiple regression in which a stepwise method was applied in forming the regression models. The listening scores were set as the dependent variable, whereas the three factors (cognitive, metacognitive, and socio-affective strategies) were set as the independent predictor variables.

In sum, regarding our first hypothesis, the result of the analysis showed that both upper-intermediate and intermediate listeners used three types of listening comprehension strategies including cognitive, metacognitive, and socio-affective strategies, suggestionthat our first hypothesis has been confirmed.

Also, the t-test results showed that there is no significant difference in the overall useof metacognitive strategies between the upper-intermediate and intermediate listeners, with a small mean difference of .93, t = 1.03, and p value = .308.

Table 3.3 shows the number of participants in each group, means, and standard deviations of the t test for the metacognitive strategy use by advanced and intermediate listeners

Group	N	Mean	Max	Std. deviation	Std. Error Mean
Upper-intermediate	15	22.73	24	2.34	.60
Intermediate	15	21.80	24	2.56	.60

Also, the results of the analyses related to the cognitive strategies demonstrate that the advanced listeners use more top-down strategies than their intermediate counterparts.

Table 3.4 shows the number of participants in each group, means, and standard deviations of the t test for the cognitive strategy use by advanced and intermediate listeners

Group	N	Mean	Max	Std. deviation	Std. Error Mean
Upper-intermediate	15	20.00	20	1.97	.50
Intermediate	15	17.60	20	3.85	.99

4. Results and Discussion

The present study examined the types of listening comprehension strategies used by Iranian upper-intermediate and intermediate EFL learners. The study was motivated by previous findings showing that advancedlearners use more strategies than less proficient ones.

The results showed that Iranian upper-intermediate and intermediate EFLlearners use more cognitive strategies than metacognitive strategies.Also, the present study results showed that Iranian upper-intermediate andintermediate EFLlearners use a great deal of socio-affective strategies.

The results also showed that cognitive strategies were the factor that contributed the most to listening comprehension,followed by socio-affective strategies, whereas metacognitive strategies contributed the least to listening comprehension.

The present study also found that Iranian upper-intermediatelearners use significantly more top-down strategies (i.e. guessing the meaning from the context, and using the main idea to guess the meaning of the new words) than intermediate ones.

References:

[1] Asher, J. J. (1969). The total physical response approach to second language learning. *Modern language Journal, 58,* 23-32. Retrieved from: http://www.jstor.org/stable/322091.

[2] Bacon, S. M. (1992a). The relationship between gender, comprehension, processing strategies, and cognitive and affective response in foreign language learning.*Modern language Journal, 76*, 160-178. doi: 10.1111/j.1540-4781.1992. tb01096.x.

[3] Baker, L. & Brown, A. L. (1984). Metacognitive skills and reading. In P. David (Ed.), *Handbook of reading research* (pp. 353-394). New York: Longman.

[4] Berne, J. E. (1993). *The effects of text type, assessment task, and target language experience on foreign language learners' performance on listening.*

[5] Boyle, J. P. (1987). Sex difference in listening vocabulary. *Language Learning 37*. 273-284. doi: 10.1111/j.1467-1770.1987.tb00568.x.

[6] Brown, A. L., & A. S. Palinscar. (1982). Introducing strategic learning from texts by means of informed self-control training. *Topics in Learning and Learning Disabilities, 2*, 1-17. Retrieved from http://www.eric.ed.gov/PDFS/ED220820.pdf.

[7] Call, M. (1985). Auditory short-term memory, listening comprehension, and the input hypothesis. *TESOL Quarterly, 19,* 765-781.

[8] Chamot, A. U., Barnhardt S., El-Dinary P. B., & Robbins J. (1999). *The LearningStrategies Handbook.* White Plains, NY: Addison, Wesley, Longman.

[9] Chastain, K. (1971). *Developing second- language skills: Theory and practice*. Chicago:Rand McNally College Publishing.

[10] Clark, M. (1980). The short circuit hypothesis of ESL reading. *The Modern Language Journal, 64,* 203-209. doi: 10.1111/j.1540-4781.1980.tb05186.x

[11] Flowerdew, J. H. & Miller, L. (2005). *Second language listening*: *Theory and practice*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

[12] Frazier, L & Leeming, S. (2007). *Lecture Ready 3*. New York: Oxford University Press.

[13] Goh, C. (2006). Metacognitive instruction in listening for young learners. *ELT Journal,60,* 222-232. doi: *10.1093/elt/ccl002.*

[14] Goss, B. (1982). Listening as information processing. *Communication Quarterly, 30,* 304-307.

[15] Rubin, J. (1988). *Improving foreign language listening comprehension*. Washington DC: US Department of Education.

[16] Rubin, J. (1994). A review of second language listening comprehension research. *The Modern Language Journal, 78*, 199-221. doi: 10.1111/j.1540- 4781.1994.tb02034.x.

[17] Schmidt-Rinehart, B. C. (1992). *The effects of topic familiarity on second language listening comprehension of university students of Spanish*. (Dissertation, OhioState University). Schmidt-Rinehart, B. C. (1994).

[18] Vandergrift, L. (1997b). The comprehension strategies of second language (French) learners: A descriptive study. *Foreign Language Annals, 30,* 3, 387-409. doi: 10.1111/j.1944-9720.1997.tb02362.x.

[19] Vandergrift, L. (1998). Successful and less successful learners in French: What are the strategy differences: *The French Review, 71*, 370-395.

[20] Wipf, J. A. (1984). Strategies for Teaching Second Language Listening Comprehension.*Foreign Language Annals, 17,* 345-348. doi: 10.1111/j.1944-720.1984.tb03240.x

[21] Zhang, D. (2001). *Singaporean secondary three students' metacognitive knowledge about. English oral skills learning*. (Unpublished master's thesis, Nan yang Technological University, Singapore).