Metacognitive awareness in English listening: A study of Taiwanese non-English majors

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Abstract

This paper reports on the findings of an investigation into the metacognitive awareness held by 213 non-English majors aged 16–18 years regarding listening comprehension in English and the difficulties they perceive and the strategies they use. The data in this study was obtained through questionnaires (MALQ, Vandergrift et al, 2006) and follow-up interviews conducted with students. The results of the study indicate that three metacognitive awarenesses, namely "problem-solving", "directed attention", and "person knowledge", are positive factors affecting EFL listening while "mental translation" is negative. The findings of the study also show that EFL learners experience a range of listening problems. Students identified a number of factors that contribute to difficulties in listening comprehension: listening text issues, the speaker, matter of motivation and interest, presentation of the spoken text, and factors relating to student themselves. Furthermore, most learners attributed their difficulties in listening to their own supposed low ability in the skill and to the difficulty of the texts set, with little awareness shown regarding the role played by ineffective listening strategies or skill application. To overcome them, various techniques which help learners to utilize effective strategies to confront problems of listening comprehension are discussed and the pedagogic implications are stated.

Keywords: metacognitive awareness, listening comprehension, non-English majors

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1. Introduction

Early interest in L2 listening research stemmed from a theory that mere exposure to comprehensible input would enhance listening skills and promote language acquisition (Krashen, 1985). Recently, this exclusive attention to input has shifted to how learners process the input. Understanding what strategies learners use and what difficulties they experience has become an integral part of listening research. Information gleaned from such research is considered useful because it provides better insights into learners’ listening ability and helps make their listening efficient. Thus, there is a growing interest in clarifying listeners’ mental processes, identifying facilitative strategies, and incorporating them into classroom activities (Thompson & Rubin, 1996; Vandergrift, 1997).

Arnold (2000) comments on how listening induces anxiety in learners, because of the pressure it places on them to process input rapidly. In many ways it is unsurprising that learners perceive listening as difficult. Buck (2001) emphasizes the complexity of the listening process, in which the listener must use a wider variety of knowledge sources, linguistic and non-linguistic, to interpret rapidly incoming data. The application of linguistic knowledge in comprehension is usually termed bottom-up processing, whereby the sounds, words, clauses and sentences of a passage are decoded in a fairly linear fashion to elicit meaning (Rost, 2002). In ‘top-down processing’, the listeners’ knowledge of the topic, their general knowledge of the world and of how texts generally ‘work’, will interact with this linguistic knowledge to create an interpretation of the text (Buck, 2001). While it is generally agreed that listening requires a combination of both forms of processing, their respective contribution to effective listening is still not clearly understood (Tsui & Fullilove, 1998). Given this complexity and perhaps because the process is largely unobservable, it may be difficult for learners to have a clear understanding of how they go about listening in a foreign language, or, more importantly, how they might improve their performance.

There is a growing number of studies that provided empirical support for the efficacy of instruction that raises learners’ awareness of the listening process through strategy training and process-oriented reflections (Cross, 2011; Graham & Macaro, 2008; Liu & Goh, 2006; Vandergrift & Tafaghodtari, 2010; Zeng, 2012). As focus on metacognitive awareness is a relatively new endeavour in research and teaching of L2 listening, there is a need to research a comprehensive metacognitive approach that addresses not only strategies but also the development of learners’ metacognitive knowledge of themselves as L2 listeners and the mental and social processes of listening (Vandergrift & Goh, 2012). This study was planned therefore with the aim of investigating students’ metacognition about EFL listening.

The research questions to be answered in this study include: 1) Does the familiarity with the content affect the learners’ comprehension? 2) To what extent do they tolerate ambiguity while listening? 3) How do they feel about listening? 4) Do they have sufficient exposure to English outside the classroom? 5) What other factors do the learners identify as affecting their listening comprehension? 6) To what extent are they aware of metacognitive listening strategies, and to what extent do they use them?

2. Literature review

2.1 Metacognition

Though much of the literature on
metacognition is limited to its use in the classroom, it has been found to be important in helping language learners comprehend an aural message (Vandergrift, 1997; Vandergrift, 2002; Vandergrift, 2004). Metacognition is defined as the learners “knowledge about learning” (Wenden, 1998, p. 516). Flavell first used the term in 1979 when he identified three types of metacognitive knowledge: person, task, and strategy. Wenden (1991) applied Flavell’s typology to language learning and identified the same kinds of metacognitive knowledge among language learners. According to Wenden (ibid.: p. 35-43) person knowledge consists of general knowledge learners have about how learning takes place and how different factors like age, aptitude, and learning styles can influence language learning. Person knowledge also includes what learners know about themselves as learners, and the beliefs they have about what leads to their success or failure in learning a language. Task knowledge refers to what learners know about the purpose, demands, and nature of learning tasks. It also includes their knowledge of the procedures that constitute these tasks. Strategic knowledge is what learners know about strategies. More specifically, it is what learners know about which strategies are likely to be effective in achieving learning goals. It includes understanding how best to approach language learning.

2.2 Metacognitive listening strategies

Metacognitive strategies are “higher order executive skills that may entail of planning for, monitoring, or evaluating the success of activity”’ (O’Malley & Chamot, 1990, p. 44) to manage, direct, regulate, and guide learning. It is evident that the development of learners’ communicative competence and language proficiency is associated with the use of these strategies (Oxford, 2002). While the relationship between metacognitive strategies awareness and language written skill acquisition and development has been extensively investigated in the literature (e.g., Sheorey & Mokhtari, 2001), it is only recently that the importance of metacognitive awareness in listening comprehension has been highlighted.

Baker and Brown (1984) distinguished two aspects of metacognitive ability: knowledge on cognition (i.e., knowing ‘what’) and regulation of cognition (i.e., knowing ‘how’). The first aspect relates to the learners’ conceptualization about their listening process, namely their awareness of what is going on and what is needed to listen effectively. Previous research has examined learners’ persistence when encountering comprehension difficulty as a factor influencing effective listening. Learners’ persistence was related to two types of metacognitive strategies: self-management (i.e., controlling language performance) and self-monitoring strategies (i.e., checking one’s comprehension) (O’Malley & Chamot, 1990). According to O’Malley et al. (1989), strong listeners use more repair strategies; when comprehension fails, strong listeners make an effort to redirect their attention back to the task quickly and keep on listening actively, while weak listeners stop listening further.

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 translations are those types
of strategies that 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 & Ganschow, 2001). Directed attention represents strategies that listeners use to concentrate and stay on listening task (Rost, 2002).

Metacognitive strategies awareness is defined as "planning and consciously executing appropriate actions to achieve a particular goal" (Sheorey & Mokhtari, 2001, p. 432) and in case of listening it is the listeners’ awareness of these five types of strategies that they utilize in the process of listening to the language input. 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). Furthermore, Chen (2010) examines first-year university students’ awareness level of metacognitive listening comprehension strategies (MLCS) on learning English as a Foreign Language (EFL). The results indicate that Taiwanese university EFL learners have a high level of awareness of MLCS. Students’ high school background, perceived ability in English listening, and time spent on practicing English listening significantly influence their awareness of some strategies.

2.3 Metacognitive awareness and listening comprehension

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 (Baleghizadeh & Rahimi, 2011; Bozorgian, 2012; Lee, 2007; Liao, 2009, Mareshal, 2007; O'Bryan & Hegelheimer, 2009; Rahimi & Katal, 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. Zeng (2012) also reported a significant relationship between metacognitive awareness and listening test performance among 1044 EFL learners in China. He found that 15% of the variance in the learners’ listening performance could be explained by their reported metacognitive knowledge in listening through the MALQ. The results that have emerged thus far are consistent with the findings in other disciplines concerning the importance of metacognition in learning.

3. Methodology

The current study adopts the contextual approach
- learners seen as varying according to context - involves a variety of data types and diverse means of data analysis. This research employs a combination of quantitative and qualitative approaches by including survey items aimed at demanding objective responses as well as qualitative interviews to elicit open-ended responses from participants. The triangulation of data has the potential to reduce the biases inherent in one method while enhancing the validity of inquiry (Greene, Caracelli, & Graham, 1989; Mackey & Gass, 2005).

3.1 Participants

The questionnaire respondents involved in this study are 213 students: one hundred and sixty four are male, forty nine are female. They had learned English as a subject in school settings for at least six years, and their English proficiency ranges from low intermediate level to intermediate level. They had neither studied abroad before, nor currently attended additional English classes outside of the classroom. 150 students (70%) had the experience of taking language proficiency test, while 63 (30%) had never taken any language proficiency test before. 30 students who indicated a willingness to be interviewed on their surveys were selected for interview phrase of this study. Their demographic information is summarized in Table 1.

| Table 1 Demographic information about the participants |
|---------------------------------|-----------------|-----------------|
| Category                        | Questionnaires Respondents (n=213) | Interviewees (n=30) |
| Gender                          |                               |                  |
| Male                            | 164                           | 18               |
| Female                          | 49                            | 12               |
| Experience of Language Proficiency Test |                            |                  |
| GEPT                            | 139                           | 16               |
| TOEIC                           | 52                            | 8                |
| TOEFL                           | 2                             | 0                |
| None                            | 63                            | 6                |

3.2 Procedure

The researcher chose to use questionnaires as they are suitable for eliciting beliefs anonymously (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2000) from a target population in a fairly short space of time. Metacognitive Awareness Listening Questionnaire (MALQ) developed and validated by Vandergrift et al. (2006) was used to assess language learners’ awareness and perceived use of listening strategies. The questionnaire contains 21 items and each item is rated on a five-point Likert scale rating from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). MALQ consists of five factors including problem-solving (six items), planning and evaluation (five items), mental translation (three items), person knowledge (three items), and directed attention (four items). The researcher translated the questionnaire into the learners’ L1 (Chinese), checking the translation with a Chinese teacher. The author then piloted the questionnaire with three students and amended it, revising several items for clarity. The students were assured of anonymity and informed that their participation was entirely voluntary. It is important to note that, using Cronbach’s alpha formula, the reliability of the MALQ questionnaire used in this study was 0.81.
The interviews conducted after the questionnaires were collected. The aim was to gather qualitative data to back up and assist the interpretation of the quantitative data. The interviews were conducted on a one-on-one basis from Nov. 2012 until Feb. 2013 and each interview was conducted in Mandarin and lasted 15-20 minutes. An interview packet was given in advance. The packet consisted of a cover letter stating the purpose of the study, an informed consent form, and a list of interview questions. These interviews were audio taped and later were transcribed.

3.3 Data analysis

Quantitative data was analyzed using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS version 12.0). Frequencies and means were used to analyze single items. Qualitative data analysis followed the five analytical-strategy steps proposed by Schmidt (2004). The researcher used peer review as a technique to verify her coding of the data. Of the 120 coded responses assigned to the data by the researcher, the peer review agreed with 90 of them. This resulted in a 75% rate of agreement among the researcher and the peer reviewer.

4. Results and discussions

4.1 Quantitative data

As can be seen from Table 2, the majority of the learners agree that they recall similar texts (statement 10), monitor performance (statement 20), and they have an overall goal and a plan in mind for how they are going to approach the listening (statements 1 & 21). However, a minority agree they evaluate their performance (statement 14). So they report planning more than evaluating.

Findings indicate the majority of learners had an overall goal and a plan in mind when approaching the listening. However, these findings need to be treated cautiously. It is possible that the learners’ goals were formed in anticipation of answering comprehension questions, while their understanding of the concept ‘plan’ may have been based on what rather than how to listen.

Findings that learners tended not to evaluate their listening would suggest lack of training in these areas. As Field (1998) argues, listening comprehension lessons can focus too often on the product rather than on trying to improve the effectiveness of the process. Teachers can concentrate on getting the answers rather than on how they were achieved.

Table 2: Planning and evaluation strategies

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No</th>
<th>Strategy / beliefs/perception</th>
<th>Strongly Agree</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Lightly Agree</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Strongly Disagree</th>
<th>Mean</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Before I start listening, I have a plan in my head for how I am going to listen.</td>
<td>30 (14%)</td>
<td>72 (34%)</td>
<td>81 (38%)</td>
<td>25 (12%)</td>
<td>5 (2%)</td>
<td>3.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Before listening, I think of similar texts that I may have listened to.</td>
<td>36 (17%)</td>
<td>84 (39%)</td>
<td>62 (29%)</td>
<td>30 (14%)</td>
<td>1 (0%)</td>
<td>3.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>After listening, I think back to how I listened, and about what might do differently next time.</td>
<td>23 (11%)</td>
<td>70 (33%)</td>
<td>76 (36%)</td>
<td>36 (17%)</td>
<td>8 (3%)</td>
<td>3.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20</td>
<td>As I listen, I periodically ask myself if I am satisfied with my level of comprehension.</td>
<td>28 (13%)</td>
<td>89 (42%)</td>
<td>78 (37%)</td>
<td>15 (7%)</td>
<td>3 (1%)</td>
<td>3.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21</td>
<td>I have a goal in my mind as I listen.</td>
<td>30 (14%)</td>
<td>73 (34%)</td>
<td>84 (39%)</td>
<td>21 (10%)</td>
<td>5 (2%)</td>
<td>3.5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3 illustrates strategies related to directed attention. As is clear from their responses, the
The majority of the learners report the use of strategies for maintaining and regaining concentration (statements 2, 6 & 12). Only a minority, approximately one third, report giving up. Therefore, most students believe they use directed attention strategies.

Findings reveal the majority of learners reported the use of strategies for maintaining and regaining concentration. This suggests they realize the ‘primary importance’, according to Vandergrift et al. (2006), of both attention and concentration in listening comprehension. These could be strategies they have acquired through listening to films, movies and other real life events (more in L1), which are then automatically transferred to their L2 listening.

Table 3 The Directed attention strategies

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No</th>
<th>Strategy / beliefs/perception</th>
<th>Strongly Agree</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Lightly Agree</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Strongly Disagree</th>
<th>Mean</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>I focus harder on the text when I have trouble understanding</td>
<td>54 (25%)</td>
<td>96 (45%)</td>
<td>46 (22%)</td>
<td>17 (8%)</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
<td>3.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>When my mind wanders, I recover my concentration right away.</td>
<td>22 (10%)</td>
<td>57 (27%)</td>
<td>105 (49%)</td>
<td>27 (13%)</td>
<td>2 (1%)</td>
<td>3.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>I try to get back on track when I lose concentration.</td>
<td>42 (20%)</td>
<td>86 (40%)</td>
<td>75 (35%)</td>
<td>8 (4%)</td>
<td>1 (0%)</td>
<td>3.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16</td>
<td>When I have difficulty understanding what I hear, I give up and stop listening.</td>
<td>7 (3%)</td>
<td>21 (10%)</td>
<td>50 (28%)</td>
<td>88 (41%)</td>
<td>37 (17%)</td>
<td>2.4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4 presents data about strategies related to person knowledge /self-awareness. Interestingly, a majority (62%) reporting that listening comprehension is a challenge, with a similar proportion they agreed that find listening in English more difficult than reading, speaking or writing (statements 3 & 8). 29% of them report not feeling nervous when they listen to English. These anxiety levels are a concern.

Findings reveal a majority consider listening more difficult than other skills, which may be because they are usually given the passive role of over-hearers, as White (1998) describes this, unable to ask for clarification from the speaker.

Furthermore, the challenge level they associate with listening may be due to extensive experience of being tested rather than taught listening. As Hedge (2000) argues, such practices can create negative self-efficacy beliefs regarding L2 listening ability. Anxiety in listening situations can then result. This may explain the anxiety levels the students reported.

Table 4 Person Knowledge and Self awareness

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No</th>
<th>Strategy / beliefs/perception</th>
<th>Strongly Agree</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Lightly Agree</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Strongly Disagree</th>
<th>Mean</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>I find that listening in English is more difficult than reading, speaking, or writing in English.</td>
<td>35 (16%)</td>
<td>48 (23%)</td>
<td>49 (23%)</td>
<td>63 (30%)</td>
<td>18 (8%)</td>
<td>3.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>I feel that listening comprehension in English is a challenge for me.</td>
<td>57 (27%)</td>
<td>74 (35%)</td>
<td>56 (26%)</td>
<td>22 (10%)</td>
<td>4 (2%)</td>
<td>3.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>I don’t feel nervous when I listen to English.</td>
<td>10 (5%)</td>
<td>52 (24%)</td>
<td>57 (27%)</td>
<td>73 (34%)</td>
<td>21 (10%)</td>
<td>2.8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As can be seen from Table 5, a majority (73%) agreed they translate in their heads as they listen,
while more than half (68%) report translating key words (statements 4 & 11). 39% of them report translating word by word as they listen, a very inefficient strategy.

As reported in above, a majority report the use of inefficient strategies, such as translating key words in their heads while listening. 39% of them even translate word by word. As Eastman (1991) argues, such practices may result from attempts to compensate for lack of experience and L2 competence. To prepare listeners to succeed, we need to help them get rid of these habits.

**Table 5 Mental Translation**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No</th>
<th>Strategy / beliefs/perception</th>
<th>Strongly Agree</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Lightly Agree</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Strongly Disagree</th>
<th>Mean</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>I translate in my head as I listen.</td>
<td>47 (22%)</td>
<td>108 (51%)</td>
<td>48 (23%)</td>
<td>8 (4%)</td>
<td>2 (1%)</td>
<td>3.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>I translate key words as I listen.</td>
<td>52 (24%)</td>
<td>97 (46%)</td>
<td>52 (24%)</td>
<td>10 (5%)</td>
<td>2 (1%)</td>
<td>3.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18</td>
<td>I translate word by word as I listen.</td>
<td>16 (8%)</td>
<td>65 (31%)</td>
<td>72 (34%)</td>
<td>50 (23%)</td>
<td>10 (5%)</td>
<td>3.1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As Table 6 shows, the learners use some efficient problem-solving strategies. The highest means are for statements 5, 9 & 17, which relate to using the context words are used in to understand their meaning. 76% agreed with statement 17. In contrast, only 47% were able to adjust their interpretation quickly. A majority reported that they did refer to their knowledge of the topic while they listened (statement 7). Clearly, learners reported using some metacognitive learning strategies more than others.

Findings reveal that learners seem to make use of some metacognitive learning strategies more than others. One efficient problem-solving strategy they tend to use is to guess words they do not know from the context, which is a strategy they may have transferred from reading. However, it seems they do not tend to make inferences by drawing on their knowledge of the subject, which White (1998) argues is an important sub-skill. Nor do they appear to adjust their interpretations while they listen, rather sticking to a hypothesis formed at the beginning. This is inefficient. Butler & Winne (1995) suggest that successful listeners monitor their interpretations, generating internal feedback that can lead to modified interpretations, and then a change in strategies used to fulfill goals.

**Table 6 Problem Solving**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No</th>
<th>Strategy / beliefs/perception</th>
<th>Strongly Agree</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Lightly Agree</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Strongly Disagree</th>
<th>Mean</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>I use the words I understand to guess the meaning of the words I don’t understand.</td>
<td>62 (29%)</td>
<td>104 (49%)</td>
<td>36 (17%)</td>
<td>8 (4%)</td>
<td>3 (1%)</td>
<td>4.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>As I listen, I compare what I understand with what I know about the topic.</td>
<td>47 (22%)</td>
<td>90 (42%)</td>
<td>67 (31%)</td>
<td>8 (4%)</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
<td>3.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>I use my experience and knowledge to help me understand.</td>
<td>52 (24%)</td>
<td>124 (58%)</td>
<td>33 (15%)</td>
<td>3 (1%)</td>
<td>1 (0%)</td>
<td>4.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>As I listen, I quickly adjust my interpretation if I realize that it is not correct.</td>
<td>33 (15%)</td>
<td>69 (32%)</td>
<td>93 (44%)</td>
<td>17 (8%)</td>
<td>1 (0%)</td>
<td>3.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17</td>
<td>I use the general idea of the text</td>
<td>62 (29%)</td>
<td>100 (48%)</td>
<td>48 (23%)</td>
<td>2 (1%)</td>
<td>1 (0%)</td>
<td>4.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
4.2 Qualitative data

4.2.1 When you are listening, does it matter if you know something about the content? Why?

The great majority of students (90%) reported that both content and background knowledge were useful, justifying their answers as follows:

- Background knowledge of the content helps me to comprehend the text (8 learners).
- It facilitates understanding of the text and of difficult words (14 learners).
- It gives an overall comprehension of the text. (3 learners)
- It helps concentration (2 learners).

Having background knowledge on the topic one is going to listen to may provide the listener with terminology and insights through which what is going to listen to is viewed. Participants’ responses reinforce this assumption where (90%) of the participants report that background knowledge or the subject they are listening to most often help them understand quicker and better. This suggests they are able to make use of schemata for top-down processing (Flowerdew & Miller, 2005), forming hypotheses about the listening text and then listening to confirm or reject these hypotheses (Buck, 2001). Clearly, these are considered to be effective strategies of listening comprehension which would help learners to overcome their listening problems (Thompson & Rubin, 1996).

4.2.2 Does the text type affect your comprehension (e.g., stories, description, dialogues)? What is your favorite type of text to listen to?

21 respondents (70%) said that the text type affected their listening, and 17 of these said they preferred stories. The following reasons were given:

- Stories attract attention, are entertaining, and create eagerness to listen (4 responses).
- Stories have a connected sequence of events, which helps the imagination (6 responses).
- Stories are easier to understand (5 responses).
- One said stories were his favorite text type if presented by the teacher with some words translated.

Interestingly, the majority favor stories as a text type, as these attract their attention, create eagerness for listening, and can be easily remembered as they contain sequenced events. This seems to be in line with Nunan’s (1989) argument that some text types are more accessible than others.

4.2.3 If you hear some unfamiliar words while listening and you do not know their meanings, do you: a) continue listening without being concerned about them, b) stop listening till they are explained or c) open your dictionary to check them? Give reasons for your choice.

20 students (67%) reported that they continued listening when they faced unfamiliar words whereas only two (7%) said that they would open their dictionaries to check the meanings.

The students who said they continue listening gave a variety of explanations, which I categorized as...
follows:

- Stopping means losing the thread of the listening (8 responses).
- Some words are not important for answering questions and it is also not necessary to understand every word as the listening is connected (4 responses).
- Other words or statements may help knowing the meaning of the unfamiliar words. For example, a student said: “continuing listening may help understanding... from other statements after it or from many statements” (5 responses).
- Using a dictionary is not allowed or takes time (3 responses)
- The teacher does stop to explain (1 response).
- Of the two learners who reported they would open their dictionaries to deal with unfamiliar words, one wrote “because it could be a key word”.

Approximately two thirds of the learners (67%) appear to tolerate ambiguity while listening, as they reported they continue listening when faced with unfamiliar words. From this we can infer they may consider a listening text as unified in terms of the meaning that it gives. This contradicts with my expectations, because, from my experience in the context, I have previously experienced intolerance of ambiguity. So, this is an encouraging finding, as tolerating ambiguity has been proved to be significantly correlated with scores on second language listening comprehension and imitation tasks (Naiman et al, 1978).

4.2.4 Choose the option that represents your view about listening. A) I like listening to English. B) I feel anxious when I listen. C) Sometimes I like it but sometime I don’t. D) I am unable to comprehend from listening. Give reasons for your choice.

A majority of the respondents had mixed or negative feelings about listening. Over a third felt unable to comprehend or felt anxious, while 40% said they enjoyed listening only sometimes. Only a quarter reported liking it. I summarize the various explanations, below.

- Eight learners stated they liked listening when the topic was easy or interesting, but not otherwise.
- Others said it depended on understanding, “because sometimes you know the meanings of the words but sometimes you do not” (3 learners).
- One reported it depended on whether the teacher facilitated the learners’ listening and helped explain the meaning of words.
- Another said problems were due to lack of experience.

Each of the participants who said they felt anxious when listening to English gave different justifications.

- One stated his anxiety was due to the difference between their own teacher’s accent and the speakers in the listening text.
- Another reported that “the reason is due to the difficulty of the topic and hence I cannot answer questions, which causes anxiety”.
- The last one said that the anxiety is due to “the short time given for listening”.

As reported above, the majority of students had mixed or negative feelings about listening. Difficulty appeared to cause anxiety. This could be related to
the notion of ‘self-esteem’ (Brown, 2000). The learners’ view of what they can do is important. If they believe they can understand a listening text, I believe they will succeed in understanding, despite unknown words. A third of the participants reported that they find it difficult to understand the meaning of spoken text without seeing the speaker’s body language. Students reported that visual clues in the form of pictures, diagrams, and charts help them understand the spoken text. This is in line with previous studies which show that ‘the use of video in listening comprehension facilitates information processing’ (Thompson & Rubin, 1996, p.333).

4.2.5 Do you listen to English outside the classroom? How often? Give examples? Have you attended any listening improvement courses other than in the school?

The great majority of the learners (76%) reported that they listened to or spoke English outside the classroom. Some indicated they used English in various situations. The following were the categories that emerged from the data:

- With foreign tourists or visitors in the city: e.g. asking for directions (8 responses).
- Watching TV programs, movies and listening to the radio (6 responses).
- With doctors in hospitals and workers who may not speak their L1 (2 responses).
- In department stores and shopping centers (7 responses).

However, the great majority of respondents (90%) had not attended listening improvement courses outside the school.

A large majority of students reported they gain exposure to English outside the classroom. However, the researcher believes their opportunities to gain this exposure may be limited. While some speak to tourists, this may only be with weekend vacationers very occasionally. Considering that the majority (90%) have not attended any courses in language institutes that might improve their listening, it seems learners’ opportunities to listen are mainly dependent on what they have in the classroom. These are insufficient for different reasons. I believe lack of exposure may add to stress in classroom listening situations, and, as Flowerdew & Miller (2005) argue, the affective dimension is very important in L2 pedagogical listening.

4.2.6 What factors make listening comprehension difficult for you? (Give as many as you can).

The students identified a number of factors that contribute to difficulties in listening comprehension. The researcher discusses these below.

The Listening text

22 students (73%) pointed out that the message itself is the main source of listening comprehension problems. In particular, unfamiliar words, difficult grammatical structures, and the length of the spoken text may present them with listening problems.

The speaker

Students reported that they encounter listening problems when speakers speak too fast or with varied accents and produce words which are not clearly pronounced (15 responses).

Lack of motivation

Students find it difficult to understand the spoken text which is not of interest to them (8 responses).

Ways of presentation of the spoken text

Students reported that unclear sounds resulting from poor classroom conditions or outside noise interfere with their understanding (5 responses).

Factors related to the learners’ themselves
Their lack of concentration while listening (17 learners). "Not concentrating from the beginning" was an example given by one learner.

What the learners bring to the listening situation, in other words, the command of language they have. This encompasses the learners' knowledge and their vocabulary repertoire (17 students), “not having enough grammatical knowledge” (6 students).

Finally one participant said: “Because my understanding ability is very limited and I do not understand easily”.

The analysis of these factors revealed that listening text issues, the speaker, matter of motivation and interest, ways of presentation of the spoken text, factors relating to the learners themselves, including their views, prior world and language knowledge and behavior, all contributed to listening comprehension difficulties. These are not surprising findings. Regarding behavior issues, for example, which the researcher would relate to lack of concentration and carelessness, she remember dealing with some learners who did not revise or study English at home except the day before the exam. The researcher believes that some students' dislike of English could result from being exposed to over-demanding tasks which Harmer (2001), suggests can happen. Difficult grammatical structures interfere with students’ listening comprehension. This conforms to Vogely’s study (1998) which shows that the difficulty in listening comprehension is partly due to the structural component of the text. Participants point out that they get tired and lose concentration very shortly. This may be due to the heavy demand on short memory. The listener has to recall the meaning of words, to resort to background knowledge, to appeal to the prior information given, etc., very quickly to cope with the high speed of the flow of live speech. This process is highly demanding on the part of the listener. It requires training, and constant practice which our advanced EFL learners badly need. This is in line with the findings of previous research which indicate that the memory span for target language input is shorter than for native language input (Call, 1985).

5. Conclusion & Suggestions

This paper has raised a number of issues regarding the teaching of listening comprehension. The researcher believes it has cast light on learners’ metacognitive awareness about listening, their perceived difficulties and the strategies they use. It has argued that gaining insights into the beliefs about L2 listening held by learners is an important first step for teachers who wish to help their students address the problems they experience. Awareness about learning and an ability to regulate learning help learners to acquire the skills of self-directed learning and become an autonomous language learner. Accordingly, examining listeners’ use of metacognitive strategies may help teachers have a better understanding of listeners’ metacognitive awareness and allow learners to find an effective approach to obtaining success in listening tasks.

Based on the findings of the study, suggestions concerning the cultivation of metacognitive awareness are made to the listeners and teachers. First, instructors should teach what metacognition is and what role metacognition plays in learning. This helps listeners to have a comprehensive system of knowledge about listening tasks and listening strategies and think about personal factors that may facilitate or impede listening. Second, instructors should carry out activities where listeners are given opportunities to practice metacognitive strategies.
This finding underlines the need to heighten student’s strategy awareness and use especially in EFL learning environments. One way to promote this awareness is including awareness-raising activities in EFL instructional materials to draw students’ attention to different learning strategies that make them more motivated and self-regulated in the process of language learning (Zhang & Goh, 2006). Further, university instructors as well as EFL teachers should become familiar with strategy-based instruction to broaden their strategy repertoires and increase their confidence and ability in teaching students how to use metacognitive strategies especially in learning with technology. Research is required to scrutinize instructors’ current level of strategy awareness and their perception of the value of metacognitive knowledge in the process of teaching and learning English Listening.

Limitations:
Firstly, the metacognitive listening awareness part of the questionnaire could have been used in combination with tests in order to investigate the correlation between the learners’ awareness and their proficiency. In addition, perhaps a longitudinal study asking the learners to reflect on their listening may have gained more reliable results. 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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英文聽力後設認知之研究：以台灣非英文系學生為例

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摘要

此研究旨在調查大學生的英文聽力後設認知，以及他們聽英文時所遇到的困難和使用的策略。研究對象為213位來自於臺灣南部兩所大學非英文系的學生，研究工具為英文聽力後設認知問卷與訪談，研究結果指出三個後設認知，即“解決問題”、“引導注意力”、“個人知識”，是積極的影響英語聽力的因素，而“精神翻譯”為負。參與研究的學生表示在聽英文時所遇到的困難因素主要來自於聽力文本，接著依序為說話者因素、聽力文本呈現方式、最後為聽者本身。最常遇到的困難包含字彙量不足、內容不熟悉、缺乏練習、背景知識不足、無法重覆聽、不懂的片語、不懂的字彙、說話方式、以及知覺層次的問題。最後，根據本研究結果及討論，指出本研究的限制以及未來相關研究之建議提出說明。

關鍵詞：後設認知，英文聽力，非英文系學生

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