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EFL Listening Comprehension in Relation to Systematic Instruction of Strategy Use

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Abstract

Previous researches concerned with EFL Listening performance confirm the fact that proficient and skilled listeners use more strategies than the less skilled ones. To see whether this fact applies for Iraqi EFL students in Cihan University, the researcher investigates the relative influence of direct strategy instruction on learners' listening comprehension performance. The participants were 40 second year students of the department of Translation at Cihan University, selected according to their scores on Topnotch Placement Test (Saslow & Ascher, 2006). A strategy use questionnaire was administered to the students who were divided into experiment and control groups, 20 learners each. The Listening Comprehension Strategy Inventory (LCSI) was given to both groups in order to extract the pattern of their strategy use. Then, the same inventory was administered to both groups after a training session on the experimental group. A significant difference was found between the mean of the experimental group with that of the control group. The results obtained from the pre and post test showed that students who received strategy instruction have developed noticeably over those who haven't. That is to say, explicit strategy training proved to be effective in improving listening and led to a better comprehension performance.

Keywords: EFL Listening Comprehension, Cognitive Strategies, Strategy Use Instruction

1. Introduction

The process of listening comprehension has proved to be a dynamic process which consists of a series of sophisticated active stages that a listener goes through (Celce-Murcia, 1996; Hedge, 2005). Many factors related to speaker, text, and/or content are involved in the complexity of the listening process in language learning environment. This would sometimes lead to frustration and poor performance. Learners want to listen and understand whatever they are exposed to but it's not that easy because of the lack of comprehensible input in almost every aspect of the language in mind.

Listening has remained a difficult skill to teach since setting listening task is considered time-consuming and boring if the strategy itself is problematic to enhance the students' level of proficiency. EFL learners may encounter some affective factors such as motivation, anxiety, self-esteem, inhibition and so forth that let them give up or quit unsuccessfully (Underwood, 1990).

There has been a growing interest for almost two decades in what should be done to help students develop and use this skill more effectively. Some researchers propose and support the strategy instruction approach where students learn about the factors that affect their learning, discover the strategies needed to become better listeners, and in so doing take more responsibility for this process. Increasing better performance of less-skilled learners requires a systematic plan, set of rules already devised by the instructor to motivate learners to plan, monitor, and evaluate their listening (Freeman, 2004; Mendelson, 2006).

2. Listening Strategies

Listening comprehension strategies are techniques or activities that contribute directly to the comprehension and recall of listening input. They are special tactics and textual clues learners consciously use to understand specific material. These decision making operations, which a learner employs in processing a listening task, are determined in part by specific task requirements, problem content, situational constraints, and prior knowledge of listeners (Oxford, 1990; Brown, 2007; Underwood, 1990).

The majority of linguists divide listening comprehension strategies into two main categories and these are cognitive and metacognitive. Cognitive strategies are "the mental activities related to the comprehending and storing input in working memory or long-term memory for later retrieval" (Richards, 2008: p.11). Such strategies enable the listener to understand whatever he/she are exposed to through mental processes that are directly concerned with the processing of information in order to understand. Types of cognitive strategies are: inferencing, elaboration, prediction, conceptualization, fixation, and reconstruction (Oxford, 1990; Richards, 2008).

Cognitive strategies are further divided into bottom-up and top-down strategies (Block, 1986; Davis & Bistodeau, 1993). By using bottom-up strategies, readers start processing information at the sentence level focusing on identification of meaning and grammatical category of a word, sentence syntax, text details, and so forth. As they try to process information given by each sentence, they use the top-down strategies such as background knowledge, prediction, and getting the gist of a text (Barnett, 1988; Carrell, 1989).

On the other hand, metacognitive strategies involve knowing about learning and controlling it through monitoring and evaluating the understanding process. They are the conscious or unconscious mental activities that perform an executive function in the management of cognitive strategies providing a way for the learners to coordinate their own learning. Types of metacognitive strategies include assessing the situation, monitoring, self-evaluating and self testing (Oxford, 1990; Carrell, 1989). Some linguists further classify listening strategies to include affective and social strategies. The former is concerned with gauging emotional reactions to learning and lowering anxieties, whereas the latter involves enhancing learning through learners cooperation and interaction.

3. Literature Review

Strategy Training

To reduce the complexity of listening comprehension for less-skilled learners, researches have proposed the use of explicit strategy instruction in ESL/EFL classrooms. A strategy-based approach includes a set of rules and regular opportunities to tackle listening problems strategically. Listeners are to be provided with enough opportunities to act upon the set of rules already devised by the. This regulated procedure helps learners to plan, monitor, and evaluate their listening.

Kasper (1984) has conducted an exploratory study on reception in aural communication focusing on EFL learners' comprehension of speech act and discourse functions, referred to as ' pragmatic comprehension', in role-play situations of learner-native speaker discourse. The data analysis indicated that the learners relied too heavily on bottom-up processing. Murphy (1985, as reported in Carissa 1997) worked with 12 intermediate university students and concluded that the high achievers used their prior knowledge, made guesses (inferring), and monitored their comprehension more often than did low achievers.

Pearson and Dole (1987) proposes another framework which involves isolated strategies by including explicit modeling and explanation of the benefits of applying a specific strategy, extensive functional practice with the strategy, and an opportunity to transfer the strategy to new learning environments. Oxford (1990) proposes an approach that starts with explicit strategy awareness of the benefits of strategy use, the importance of contextualized training, monitored performance and implementation of strategies in different classroom tasks.

Mendelson (2006) mentions the term "a strategy –based" approach proposing that the classroom curriculum for a listening course should include instructing the listeners about listening strategies. This instructing functions as pillars upon which a

listening course is built. A strategy –based approach, he states, makes learners" aware of the strategies that they use, and train them in the use of additional strategies that will assist them in tackling listening tasks" (p.75). Field (2000) suggests that listening lessons at the levels should be authentic and take the following two points into consideration. First, listeners should be carefully briefed so that they feel comfortable about being exposed to listening tasks where they may have problems to understand the message. Second, instructors should grade the difficulty of tasks to fit the comprehension level rather than grading the text so that listeners would be able to achieve it.

To investigate the effect of strategy–based instruction program on developing EFL listening comprehension skills, Attia (2002) conducted a study that involved three different approaches: strategy training, metacognitive instruction and pure exposure on listening performance. The result of the study demonstrated that strategy training is better in promoting all the variables addressed and compares favorably with metacognitive instruction and pure exposure.

Brown (2007) illustrates the difference between past approaches in which listening materials were frequently based on a series of post-listening comprehension questions and modern language teaching where teachers can help students more effectively when they spend more time teaching them about the purpose of for listening. As such, it helps students organize and reflect on their own learning. He suggests implementing a well designed approach to help students explore ways of lessening the difficulty of listening through training them in different types of listening strategy usage.

Some researchers focused on metacognitive instruction as a strategy-based approach that improves less-skilled EFL Learners' performance. Vandergrift & Tafaghodtari (2010) measured the listening comprehension performance of less-skilled learners through a pre-and pos test within a guided methodology while Cross (2011), conducted a small-scale study of the effect of metacognitive instruction on EFL learners' comprehension over five lessons. The results proved a positive contribution of the instruction on overall performance.

4. Research Question

The study aims at addressing the following question:

- Does systematic instruction contribute to listening comprehension strategy use of Iraqi EFL learners?

5. Methodology

5.1. Participants

The participants of the study were 50 EFL learners both male and female, second year students/Department of Translation at Cihan university-Erbil. Using the Topnotch Placement test (Saslow & Ascher, 2006), the researcher selected 40 students according to the results. Finally the subjects were divided into experimental and control groups, 20 students each.

5.2. Instrument

For the initial selection of participants, the Topnotch Placement test (Saslow & Ascher, 2006) was used and based on the results, 20 out of 40 participants were selected. Then, the Listening Comprehension Strategy Inventory test (LCSI) was applied to determine the listening comprehension strategies students needed. Developed by Gerchek (2000), the LCSI includes 12 listening strategies which were supplemented by 3 statements to develop a comprehensive questionnaire for the purpose of extracting the listening comprehension strategies.

5.3. Procedure

The training, which was basically based on the strategy training suggested by Oxford (1990), involved: determining learners' needs and the resources available for training, selecting the strategies to be taught considering the benefits of integrated strategy training, considering motivational issues, preparing the activities, conducting explicit strategy training, and evaluating and revising the strategy training. The training, testing, and collecting test results occurred within a four-week period. The class met three times per week and each class lasted for 50 minutes. The listening material for the practice and the test were chosen from Baron's TOFEL. It was attempted to choose texts that suit the students' level of proficiency.

The strategy training aimed at helping students self-diagnose their strengths and weaknesses, become aware of what helps them learn the language efficiently, develop a broad range of problem-solving skills, make decisions about how to approach a language task, monitor and self evaluate their performance, and finally transfer successful strategies to new learning contexts.

A proficiency test, Topnotch (2006), was given first given to 50 EFL learners and those were second year students / Department of Translation at Cihan University-Erbil. Students with the scores ranging from 70-92 were selected to be the subjects of the research and were divided into experimental and control groups. Then, the LCSI

was used to extract the listening comprehension strategies learners intended to use more.

During the strategy instruction which lasted for 6 weeks, the teacher helped the experimental group to develop some strategies in terms of understanding their nature and ways of applying them. The way listening strategies would help the learners comprehend a specific text was explained and discussed explicitly. This training was conducted on 3 days a week and lasted roughly 30 minutes at each session. An important phase of the training was the part where the teacher discussed with the learners the importance of listening strategies for them according to their learning background. This reflected the awareness raising part of the training which is connected with metacognitive strategies.

The training also included the accomplishment of a task which illustrates the way of using the discussed strategy. This was followed by another task where students were required to consolidate whatever they have learned about certain strategies. As for the

Control group, no strategy instruction were given nor any discussion of the strategies' significance delivered. The students participated in activities concerning the language skills with different tasks and listened to the listening sections without explicit awareness of the listening strategies. The LCSi was given to the two groups again after the training to see the effect of strategy instruction on the learners' performance in terms of strategy usage.

5.4. Data Analysis

The data were analyzed by using Independent Sample t-test to ensure the homogeneity of the experimental and the control groups regarding listening comprehension before the strategy instruction. To find out the contribution of strategy training on listening comprehension performance of the learners, the data were further subject to frequency count test and t-tests. To determine the frequency of listening strategies used by the participants, the liker scale of the LCSi ranged from 1-5 (Oxford, 1990) was applied. The lowest mean is 1.0(never or almost never used) and the highest mean frequency is 5.0(always or almost always used). The mean strategy use frequency of the experimental and control groups were measured before and after the strategy instruction.

6. Results & Discussion

This section illustrates and discusses the results obtained throughout the research. To know the difference between the experimental and the control groups before the strategy instruction, a homogeneity test was undertaken.

Table1: Statistics of the Homogeneity Test

Groups	N	Mean	Std.Deviation	Std.Error Mean
Experimental	20	14.0000	1.260	78.42513
Control	20	14.0600	1.434	12.44602

Table 1 indicates no significant difference between the two groups since the mean scores of them were 14.00 and 14.06. To make sure of the results, an independent sample test was used as shown in table 2.

Table 2: Independent Sample tests for the Homogeneity Test

	t-test for the Equality of Means					
	T Upper	df	Sig (2 tailed)	Mean Difference	Std.Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference Lower
Equal Variances Assumed	.40	.36	-.05	-.04	.67764	.1.59
Equal Variances Not Assumed						

The above table confirms the fact that the two groups were homogenous before the training since the sig (2-tailed) was .05.

Table 3: Mean frequency of listening comprehension strategy use before and after the instruction

	Experimental Group		Control Group	
	N	Mean	N	Mean
Before	20	3.01	20	2.34
After	20	3.83	20	2.62

Based on the key provided by Oxford (1990) and according to the results in the above table, there is an important variation between the mean values of strategy use regarding the experimental group whereas no significant difference was noticed regarding the control group. The mean frequency for the experimental group before the strategy training was 3.01 and for the control group 2.34. After the training, the numbers changed to be 3.83 for the experimental group and 2.62 for the control group.

Table 4: Independent Sample tests for the two groups before the strategy instruction

	Levene's Test for Equality of Variances				t-test for the Equality of Means				
	F	Sig	T	df	Sig (2tailed)	Mean Difference	Std.Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
								Lower	Upper
Equal Variances Assumed	1.140	.293	1.344	21	.190	.37330	.27710	20141	.94811
Equal Variances Not Assumed			1.344	14.355	.193	.37330	.27710	21050	.95714

Table 4 illustrates the results of the equality means test for the experimental and control groups. The probability figure (Sig.(2-tailed)) is (.190) and that is larger than 0.5 and the Levene's test is (.293), which is also greater than 0.5. This means that there is no significant difference between the two groups in terms of strategy use before the training. The same test was run to the experimental group after being given the training module and the results are shown in the following table:

Table 5: Independent Sample t-Test of Strategy Use after training

	Levene's Test for Equality of Variances				t-test for the Equality of Means				
	F	Sig	T	df	Sig (2tailed)	Mean Difference	Std.Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
								Lower	Upper
Equal Variances Assumed	.238	.598	5.254	21	.000	1.13016	.211280	.65750	1.4054
Equal Variances Not Assumed			5.254	19.300	.000	1.13016	.211280	.65641	1.49150

Looking at the results above, the p level is (.000) that is less than .05. As for Levene's test, the number is .598 which is bigger than .05. Due to these numbers and those of the mean difference of strategy use between the two groups, mentioned in Table 1 (3.92 and 2.78 respectively), there is a significant difference between the two groups after strategy training.

Results of the study refer to the fact that there was statistically important difference between the performance of the participants in the pre and post test. Based on the activities accomplished during the training period, a significant improvement in the students' performance was noticed. The experimental group received different treatments both in class and as homework and this resulted in considerable influence on their listening comprehension performance.

7. Conclusions

This research was intended to find out the influence of direct and explicit listening strategy instruction or training on Iraqi EFL learners' listening comprehension performance. The results show a positive relationship between strategy instruction and improvement of listening comprehension in foreign language listening classrooms. The application of explicit and direct instruction helped the students become aware of what helps them accomplish the listening tasks successfully, experiment with different strategies, make decisions, monitor and evaluate their performance, and transfer strategy usage to further contexts. Therefore, students should be trained about how to effectively use listening strategies, be aware of vocabulary knowledge and grammatical structures, listening to main ideas and details, guessing meaning of vocabulary from context clues, predicting content, and taking notes effectively. The traditional concept of just exposing learners to listening materials without any instruction should be challenged by a method through which the use of strategies is embedded successfully by means of training programs.

8. Pedagogical Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, teachers of EFL should consider many points to ensure effective listening comprehension performance. They should help their students recognize learning strategies, strengthen them, and generate new ones. The lesson should include activities that help the learners examine what the listening process entails and involves. Teachers should be capable of identifying the listening problems their students suffer from. This could be done by discussing the time and way of choosing certain strategy in addition to the reasons behind these choices. Through such discussions, teachers can lead their students to realize the strategy they use while listening by providing practical examples and actual listening materials.

Learners should also be guided to recognize alternative listening strategies and identify when and how to use them. This can be achieved through activities where students compare and contrast the various problem-solving strategies in different situations. Finally, strategy instruction and training is really an effective approach in EFL classrooms because it helps students assess their weaknesses, be aware of the most suitable listening strategies that should be used for certain tasks, and make plans to develop relevant strategies and skills that would improve their performance.

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