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INVESTIGATING THE IMPACT OF TEACHING LISTENING COMPREHENSION
STRATEGIES ON THE IMPROVEMENT OF LISTENING COMPREHENSION ABILITY OF
IRANIAN EFL LEARNERS

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ABSTRACT

This study aimed at investigating the influence of teaching listening comprehension strategies on the improvement of listening comprehension ability of Iranian EFL learners. In doing so, 80 upper-intermediate students were chosen to take Interchange Placement Test. The students were divided equally into two groups: experimental group and control group. They were given a strategy use questionnaire. According to the results of the study, the experimental group showed higher levels of proficiency in comparison with the control group after receiving instruction. Therefore, it was concluded that teaching listening comprehension strategies can play a major role in the improvement of listening comprehension ability. The implications of the finding are presented at the end of the study.

Keywords: Listeningstrategy, strategy instruction, listening comprehension ability

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INTRODUCTION

Listening has a significant role in language learning, yet it is still an area where students feel most disappointed and powerless. In Iran's English teaching, listening has been stressed for a long time, however this skill stays poor for some learners even after they have had five to ten years of involvement in learning English.

One main reason is related to the teaching and learning methodology. The reality of the matter is that teaching learners how to solve a listening task by using a variety of strategies will prompt better comprehension. Be that as it may, for some teachers, teaching listening is the most effortless of all English courses. They should simply play the tape, let the students listen and do the Comprehension activities, play the tape again and check their comprehension. Undoubtedly, teaching practice in this perspective has by and large neglected to get up to speed with the advancement of EFL theory. The target of classroom teaching is to help students create listening strategies and skills as opposed to giving random practice. In light of numerous new breakthroughs and advances in comprehension the way of listening and the strategies and skills included, this study considers the effect of strategy instruction on listening

comprehension. Most of language learners find it hard to go on concerning listening comprehension in the course of learning any language especially when there is lack of comprehensible input (Mitchell and Myles, 2004). Listening is the most important skill which can be improved therefore, it should be the focus of attention in language class (Oxford, 1998). The problem is how to improve this skill. Oxford (1990) states that learning strategies are specific actions taken by students to improve their learning. With regard to strategy instruction in terms of listening comprehension, since listening is important for learning a language, in recent years there has been a growing tendency in what should be done to help learners develop and use this skill more efficiently; because not all language learners acquire the same listening proficiency level in order to communicate successfully. Some researchers state that strategy instruction is still a matter of controversy (Goh, 2002; Cohen and Macaro, 2007). Listening strategy instruction has received little attention in language classrooms because learners are not aware of the true nature of listening and the way of improving their listening ability. Therefore, the present study aims at investigating the impact of teaching listening comprehension strategies on the listening comprehension ability on Iranian EFL learners.

Research Question

This study attempts to answer the following question:

- Does teaching of listening comprehension strategies affect the listening comprehension ability of students?

Review of the literature

Listening Strategies

According to Tyagi (2013) listening strategies are techniques which help students understand and remember listening input. Listening strategies can be classified based on the way the listener processes the input.

Top-down strategies are listener oriented; the listener makes use of background knowledge of the topic, the context, the language, and the type of text. This background knowledge helps the listeners to interpret what they hear and to predict what might come after that. Top-down strategies include

- listening for the main idea
- predicting
- making inferences
- summarizing

On the other hand, *Bottom-up strategies* are text oriented; the listener relies on the sounds, grammar, and words that make meaning. These strategies are:

- listening for specific details
- recognizing cognates
- recognizing word-order patterns

Strategic listeners also make use of *met cognitive strategies* in order to monitor, plan, and evaluate their listening. They are used to plan for thinking about the process of learning and also to monitor their comprehension and production (Brown, 2007).

Cognitive Strategies: These strategies are confined to some special learning tasks which include more direct manipulation of the learning material itself. These strategies are as follows:

Inferencing: Listeners provide the missing information like the meanings of unknown words and parts of a text when they are listening by using keywords and context.

Elaboration: Listeners relate new information to existing knowledge in order to provide a more complete interpretation.

Prediction: Helps listeners to predict what comes next through anticipating the content based on the topic or title before they listen and they predict the details when they are listening.

Conceptualization: Listener relates new information to a more general and wider situation or context to make a better interpretation of it.

Fixation: Listener pays a closer attention to a small part of spoken text to make a better comprehension of it.

Reconstruction: Listener uses new words from the text to make to meaning of the original input.

Socio-affective strategies: These strategies are related to the social-mediating activities and the interaction with other individuals. Several factors might affect the choice of language learning strategies such as gender, learning styles, cultural background, tolerance of ambiguity, attitudes and beliefs, degree of awareness, type of task, personality traits, and nationality (Oxford, 1990).

How to Teach Strategies in the Classroom:

Oxford (1990) makes a comprehensive view of learning strategies. The strategies are classified into two groups: *direct* or *cognitive strategies*, which learners use directly to the language itself. And *indirect* or *meta-cognitive strategies*, in which learners manage their own learning process.

The following three different approaches can be found to be applicable in teaching strategies in language classrooms.

Frameworks for teaching strategies

The first framework, developed by Chamot and O'Malley (1994), is useful after students have had practice in using a wide range of strategies in different contexts. Their approach to helping students complete language learning tasks can be described as a four-stage problem-solving process.

- 1) Planning. Students plan ways to approach a learning task.
- 2) Monitoring. Students self-monitor their performance by paying attention to their strategy use and checking comprehension.
- 3) Problem Solving. Students find solutions to problems they encounter.
- 4) Evaluation. Students learn to evaluate the effectiveness of a given strategy after it has been applied to a learning task.

The second framework, was devised by Pearson and Dole (1987 as quoted in Cohen, 2003) with regard to first language learning but it can be applied for the study of a second language too. This framework is concerned with isolated strategies by encompassing explicit modeling and explication of the benefits of utilizing a specific strategy, extensive functional practice with the strategy, and the chance of that strategy to transfer the strategy to new learning contexts.

Oxford et al. (1990) proposed another framework, which can be useful for introducing strategies, including explicit strategy awareness, functional and contextualized practice with the strategies, discussion of the benefits of strategy use, self-evaluation and monitoring of language performance, and the suggestions and demonstrations of the transferability of the strategies to new tasks.

Steps for Designing Strategy Instruction:

The following seven steps are based largely on suggestions of strategy training by Oxford (1990).

1. Determine learners' needs and the resources available for training.
2. Select the strategies to be taught.
3. Consider the benefits of integrated strategy training.
4. Consider motivational issues.
5. Prepare the materials and activities.
6. Conduct explicit strategy training.
7. Evaluate and revise the strategy training.

Goals of Strategy Instruction:

Strategy instruction tries to provide learners with the instruments to do the following (Cohen, 2003):

- Self-diagnose their strengths and weaknesses in language learning
- Become aware of what helps them to learn the target language most efficiently
- Develop a broad range of problem-solving skills
- Experiment with familiar and unfamiliar learning strategies
- Make decisions about how to approach a language task
- Monitor and self-evaluate their performance
- Transfer successful strategies to new learning contexts

Cohen (2000), defined language learning and language use strategies as processes which are consciously chosen by learners. However, language learning strategies are used to improve learner knowledge of a given

language, and they comprise affective strategies, cognitive strategies, meta-cognitive strategies, and social strategies.

3. Method

Participants:The participants in this study were 80 EFL learners between 18 to 30 years of age in Navid Language Institute in Shiraz, Iran. The students took Interchange Placement Test devised by Lesley Hansen, and Zukowski-Faust (2005).The students were divided into experimental and control groups, with forty students in each group.

Instruments

The three questionnaires used in this study were Listening Comprehension Strategy Inventory (LCSI), Interchange Placement Test, and the Listening Task Battery. Students were asked to take Interchange Placement Test in order to specify their proficiency level. Then, they were asked to fill in the LCSI devised by Gerçek (2000).This questionnaire is comprised of twelve listening comprehension strategies.

Procedure

The students were required to take Interchange Placement Test. Based on their scores, there were divided into control and experimental groups. Students were asked to fill in LCSI to show what listening strategies they use. Then the LCSI results of both experimental and control groups were compared to see whether there was any significant difference between the two groups in terms of using listening comprehension strategies. Finally, their listening comprehension ability was assessed by the Listening Task Battery.

The students in the experimental group received instruction for two months, two hours a week. They talked about the strategies they used explicitly. But the students in the control group received no instruction and did not talk about their strategies explicitly. Students in the control group followed the class activities and followed the listening activities of the book but they were not with listening comprehension strategies. Then, a listening task battery was administered to students to measure their listening comprehension ability before and after treatment. Table 4.4 shows the result.

4. Data Analysis

In order to compare the difference in listening comprehension ability and the frequency of using listening comprehension strategies of students before and after teaching listening comprehension strategies, the LCSI was administered to students twice (i.e. before and after teaching listening comprehension strategies). The LCSI items were scored on a five-point Likert scale from 1 (= never or almost never used) to 5 (= always or almost always used). Therefore, the lowest mean (= 1) indicates the lowest ability in listening comprehension and the highest mean (= 5) indicates the highest ability in listening comprehension. The mean for the experimental group before treatment was 4.23 and for the control group it was 3.07. But after treatment the mean for the experimental group was 4.95 and for the control group it was 3.12.

Table 4.1 Mean frequency of listening comprehension strategy use before and after the instruction

	Experimental Group		Control Group	
	N	Mean	N	Mean
Before	40	4.23	40	3.07
After	40	4.95	40	3.128

As Table 4.1 indicates, there was a significant difference in the mean value of experimental group after treatment. In order to find out whether there was a significant difference between listening comprehension ability of students before and after receiving instruction in listening strategies, an independent-samples t-test was conducted. Tables 5.1 shows the result of independent-samples t-test.

Table 4.2 Independent-Samples t-test of using listening strategies before instruction

	Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means						
	F	Sig.	T	Df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
								Lower	Upper
Equal variances assumed	1.597	0.34	1.255	44	0.236	0.462	0.06358	-0.3036	0.87987
Equal variances not assumed			1.255	41.745	0.241	0.462	0.06473	-0.314	0.89291

According to Table 4.2, there was no statistically significant difference between experimental and control groups before instruction (Sig. 2-tailed = .236). The same statistical procedure was followed after students received instruction to see whether there was any improvement in students' listening comprehension ability after receiving instruction in using listening strategies. Table 4.3 shows the result.

Table 4.3. Independent-samples t-test of using listening strategies after instruction

	Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means						
	F	Sig.	T	Df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
								Lower	Upper
Equal variances assumed	0.343	0.598	6.128	44	0	1.245	0.04256	0.76523	1.4672
Equal variances not assumed			6.128	42.723	0	1.245	0.04256	0.76241	1.4891

As Table 4.3 indicates, there was a statistically significant difference (Sig 2-tailed= .000) between experimental and control groups after treatment in terms of using listening comprehension strategies.

Table 4.4 Listening performance by task pre- and post- test means

Pre- and Post- test means	Task 1	Task 2	Task 3
	Short story	Science report	News report
Experimental group (N=40)	4.85 / 5.34	4.21 / 4.89	4.12 / 4.83
Control group	4.74 / 4.79	4.32 / 4.41	4.09 / 4.13

(N=40)			
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According to Table 4.4, the experimental group outperformed the control group in terms of their listening comprehension ability on the three tasks.

5. Discussion

This study aimed at investigating the impact of teaching listening comprehension strategies on the listening comprehension ability of Iranian EFL learners. Listening Comprehension Strategy Inventory (LCSI) was administered to both the experimental and control groups to find out what strategies students used while listening. Then, the Listening Task Battery administered to the students in order to assess their listening comprehension ability. The results showed that there was a statistically significant difference between experimental and control groups in terms of their means. So, we can conclude that teaching listening comprehension strategies had a significant effect on students' listening comprehension ability.

6. Implications

The aim of this study was to see whether teaching listening comprehension strategies had any impact of the betterment of listening comprehension ability of Iranian EFL learners. It was found that teaching listening comprehension strategies to students leads to the improvement of their listening comprehension ability. Therefore, teachers should not only teach their students what to learn but also they should tell them how to learn and they should develop their students' self-awareness in learning. In doing so, teachers should find their students' weakness in order to help them fill their gaps through teaching them listening comprehension strategies. Therefore, it is advisable to mix listening activities with strategies-based tasks in classrooms. The finding of this study can be useful for teachers, instructors, textbook writers, and anyone who is directly or indirectly engaged in designing textbook materials to take into account the importance of listening comprehension strategies in designing textbook materials.

7. Conclusion

The idea of only providing students with listening materials does not seem to lead much progress in listening comprehension ability. Therefore, we conclude that the teachers' role should be beyond just the mechanical operation of tape recorders. Teachers must be familiar with listening comprehension strategies and make students familiar with those strategies and teach them how to use them effectively in order to develop their students' listening comprehension ability. The more strategies students use, the better their performance.

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