# The Influence of the Level of Proficiency and Listening Comprehension Strategy Use of Iranian EFL Learners

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**ABSTRACT**

This research was focused on a specific group of sophomores of English translation at Islamic Azad university Abadeh branch. The study was designed to investigate the strategies the students used in class when they failed to understand the lecturers. The results of the study point out the difficulty students have in adjusting to an English medium of instruction. The study supports an inverse relationship between English proficiency level and translating into Farsi while the teacher lectures in English and being frustrated at a lack of listening comprehension. The data obtained was then analyzed using the SPSS program for mean, standard deviation, percentage and t.tests. All the results of this study point out that the students don't consistently employ listening strategies to help them develop their listening skills.

**Keywords:** Listening comprehension strategy, proficiency level

## INTRODUCTION

Listening to spoken language has been acknowledged theoretically to consist of active and complex processes which determine the level and content of comprehension. Listeners engage in a variety of mental processes in an effort to comprehend information from oral texts. They focus on selected aspects of aural input, construct meaning from passages, and relate what they hear to existing knowledge. However, there is hardly a perfect match between input and knowledge; comprehension gaps occur and special efforts to reduce meaning are required, especially for second language learners. The mental processes that are activated by listeners to understand, learn, or to retain new information from utterances are referred to as listening comprehension strategies.

Listening comprehension is viewed theoretically as an active process in which individuals focus on selected aspects of aural input, construct meaning from passages, and relate what they hear to existing knowledge. This theoretical view has not been sufficiently supported by direct research which clarifies what listeners actually do while engaged in listening tasks.While the importance of the listening skill for developing language competency has long been recognized, the actual mechanisms for listening comprehension have been only vaguely described. Listening was often classified as one of the skills of reception rather than production like speaking, making it seem a passive skill. However, as Rivers points out listening comprehension is a very active skill. "Far from being an act of reception it involves the construction of a message from phonic material…" (Rivers,1983A:97). When we think of learning a language, traditionally we think of learning four basic skills: listening, speaking, reading and writing. Listening is listed first not only because it appears first in natural first language acquisition but because it is used the most. "On average, we can expect to listen twice as much as we speak, four times more than we read and five times more than we write" (Rivers, 1981; Weaver 1972 cited inMorley:70). Research into speech perception has shown that listening comprehension involves far more than mere decoding of the sounds. Rivers (1983B:80-83) in her discussion of speech perception identifies three stages. First, the listener must recognize that the sounds are an actual message and not just noise. This recognition means to the listener that the sounds are elements of the language system. In the second stage the listener identifies sounds along with lexical and syntactic forms by segmenting and grouping them. The third stage involves recoding in order to retain the auditory message in long-term storage.

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These stages are necessarily rapid and overlapping. Whether the process of listening comprehension is as described above or in some other form, it is certainly an active process involving cognitive processing. Second language learners at lower levels of language proficiency whether it be due to a lack of auditory experience with varying accents, limited vocabulary, imperfect control of the syntactic and semantic structure of the language, or other limitations with regard to the elements necessary for communicative competency need to rely on listening strategies to assist them in comprehending the aural communication. Brown (1995:104) quite appropriately compares strategies to "battle plans": Strategies are specific methods of approaching a problem or task, modes of operation for achieving a particular end, planned designs for controlling and manipulating certain information. They are contextualized "battle plans" that might vary from moment to moment, or day to day, or year to year. A great deal has been written about language strategies. These strategies have been categorized as learning strategies and communication strategies. The relationship of learning strategies (LS) to communication strategies (CS) is somewhat problematic." However, she goes on to state that ultimately they can be distinguished on the basis of the learner's motivation in employing the strategy. Ellis (1985:181) has stated that, "Communication strategies are problem oriented.

That is they are employed by the learner because he lacks or cannot gain access to the linguistic resources required to express an intended meaning." They are "short term answers" while learning strategies Ellis points are "long-term solutions."

In general, discussion of and research on these communication strategies have focused on the learner's behavior when his production in the second language shuts down. Little research has focused specifically on strategies employed when the learner finds he cannot comprehend the auditory message. This research specifically intended to address the question of what strategies the listener employed to solve the problem when he/she failed to comprehend the message he/she was listening to. The listener's level of language competency was considered an important variable in the listener's choice of strategy. Paterson (2001:90 cited in Celce Murcia) states that "Strategy use varies with proficiency and so the relationship between strategy use and proficiency level is an important one."

Literature review: From the review of research literature, several studies are found to be directly related to the present study. Nakata (2000) studied the influence of listening strategy training on Japanese EFL learners' listening competence. Results showed that the effect of listening strategy training was more discernible on perception than on comprehension, especially for those students who received low scores on the proficiency tests.

Furthermore, some research has suggested the pedagogical implications for teaching L2 listening strategies. Mendelsohn (2000) has proposed a model of listening course in which there were units on different strategies or aspects of listening, with training activities contained in them. These training

activities were specifically designed to give students practice in utilizing different signals and trying different strategies. Hagino (2001) assessed the activities to foster listening strategies. Three kinds of meaning-focused task for intentional vocabulary learning were conducted in the Japanese EFL classroom. He found that the bilingual word list was the most effective in learning of the L2 vocabulary. Moreover, Laviosa (2005 examined the implementation of a Cognitive Apprenticeship Approach to L2 listening comprehension with intermediate learners of Italian. This model with teacher's and students' interrelated activities consists of such steps as eliciting, modeling, observing, coaching, scaffolding, and fading assistance. Vandergrift (2000) has also explained how L2 listeners can use strategies to enhance their learning processes and how teachers can nurture the development of listening strategies.

Objectives of the study: This study mainly focused on investigating listening strategy uses at different proficiency levels. Specifically the purpose of the study was to find the answers of the following questions.

1. What do students do when they do not understand the lecturers?

2. Is there any difference in strategy use when the student's level of English proficiency is considered?

## METHODOLOGY

### Subjects

Subjects were 30 sophomor students from oral reproduction class at Islamic azad university Abadeh branch Abadeh Iran. Having learned English as a foreign language for about six years in school before entering the university, they had approximately a low-intermediate level of EFL. Subjects took the required course English Listening Practice twice a week in the first and second semesters of their education.

## INSTRUMENTATION

The instruments used in the study consisted of a listening strategy questionnaire. The questionnaire consisted of ten statements in the format of multiple choice questions and the alternatives were ordered as strongly agree, agree, disagree, strongly disagree.and also the oxford quick placement test developed by Cambridge University that was used to identify the student's level of English proficiency.

Procedures:

according to the scores students were divided into five groups as,elementary,lower intermediate, intermediate, upper intermediate and advanced. The relationship of the scores and the stated proficiency levels are as follows:

Elementary…………..0to39

Lower intermediate…………40to49

Intermediate…………….50 to 59

Upper intermediate……………60to69

Advanced…………………70 to 100

Students were asked also to complete a questionnaire on Listening Comprehension Strategies founded by the researchers in the internet (NUIC, Naresuan University ). As stated before the questionnaire consisted of ten statements in the format of multiple choice questions and the alternatives were ordered as strongly agree,agree,disagree, strongly disagree. Regarding the student's behavior when in class and he/she could not comprehend the Lecturer who was teaching through the medium of English Separate focus groups were also formed for a Sampling of students at each proficiency level the results of the discussion in the focus Groups were analyzed and compared. The data obtained was then analyzed using the SPSS program for mean, standard deviation, percentage, and t-tests.

## DATA ANALYSIS

An analysis of the data showed that what the students do when having difficulty in understanding the classroom lectures.

**Table1.** *Listening Strategies in Order of Performance strategy*

|   | Strategy Standard deviation | x |
|---|---|---|
| 1 | I continue to listen even when I can't understand | .713.24 |
| 2 | I ask my friend to explain in farsi after class | .713.22 |
| 3 | I keep listening and write down words I hear | .633.22 |
| 4 | I look and read the handouts to help me | .643.17 |
| 5 | I think of other things and read the book, handout Or my friend's notes after class | .613.15 |
| 6 | I ask my friend to explain in farsi right then. | .893.06 |
| 7 | I raise my hand and ask the teacher to speak slower. | .762.99 |
| 8 | I raise my hand and ask questions to help me understand | .832.86 |
| 9 | I tape the lesson and listen again later | .932.55 |
| 10 | I feel frustrated. | .812.30 |

As can be seen in Table 1 the students continue to listen to the audio message Even when they don't understand as evidenced by the mean scores of 3.24 and 3.22 for '…continue to listen…' and '…listen and write down words…' While both of these Strategies indicate an active approach to listening and trying to comprehend the message, They were rated only as agree.

None of the strategies received a 1 rating of strongly agree. The students did not appear to be frustrated by not understanding what they heard x=2.30 '…feel frustrated.' However, they did not ask questions x=299 'ask the teacher to speak slower' and x=2.86ask questions to help understand.' Surprisingly, students did not agree with the strategy of taping lectures to listen to later' rated at only x=2.55.

The students' performance on using strategies indicates that students clearly need guidance in how good strategies can help in developing their language skills. Students agreed with daydreaming in class3.11 think of other things…' and translating, 3.06 explain in Farsi right then,' neither of which can actively develop their listening skills.

The second question asked in this study was whether the students' use of listening strategies correlated to their level of English proficiency. English proficiency was defined here by ALTE levels obtained from the students' scores on the Oxford Quick Placement Test. The students' levels of English ranged from elementary to advanced. The inter correlations are displayed in Table 2.

**Table2.** *Inter correlations among Listening Strategies and English Proficiency 1 2 3 4 5678910*

1 1.00

2 .16 1.00

3. .09 .06 1.00

4. .08 .10 .45*** 1.00

5. .01 -.01 -.01 -.06 1.00

6. .20* -.05 -.10 .29** -.07 1.00

7. .15 .13 -.11 -.03 .15 .03 1.00

8. .12 .12 -.16 .12 -.19 .37*** .35** 1.00

9. -.24** .05 .14 .14 .07 -.07 -.03 -.09 1.00

10. .12 .06*** -.14 -.01 28** .01 .20* .19* -.12 1.00

Eng. P. .19 -.16 -.33** -.07 -.21* .05 .04 .14 -.33** -.12

Eng.O.= English Proficiency Level *= <.000 **=<..05 ***=<.01

Only three of the strategies are related to the students' English proficiency level. It was found that '…asking a friend to explain in farsi As expected the relationship is a negative one. The more students rely on translating into farsi in the classroom and the more frustrated they become, the more it was found that they are at a lower proficiency level in English. Surprisingly, the third correlation at a level of .05 significance also related negatively. This was 'tape the lesson and listen again later.' As pointed out earlier this strategy would be expected to be helpful in developing language skills. More in depth data needs to be collected to investigate the students' actual use of taping and how they use the tape though.

## RESULT

The study supports an inverse relationship between English proficiency level and translating into Farsi while the teacher lectures in English and being frustrated at a lack of listening comprehension. Above all the results of this study point out that the students don't consistently employ listening strategies to help them develop their listening skills It is recommended that students be given training and actual guided practice in using specific strategies to improve their listening comprehension. Mere exposure to the strategies is not sufficient. During the semester a list of 15 listening tips (Global English:2003) was presented to the students. Two of the listening tips were posted on a notice board outside their classroom. The instructor talked about the tips and told the students to look at the notice board which was changed every other week. However, from the results of this survey and the focus groups there is little evidence that students are actively employing the strategies. The present research can provide the following contributions: to empirically investigate the effect of strategy instruction on L2 listening comprehension, to provide process-oriented descriptions for the research literature of listening strategy training, and with instructional implication to teach students how to employ effective EFL listening strategies. Consequently, the students should be not only exposed to EFL listening but also taught how to listen. finally it is worth to mention that:The listening skill as Rivers has noted is an active skill. We as teachers must train our students to develop a proactive response to overcome deficiencies in their listening comprehension.

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