



# The Effect of Metacognitive Listening Strategy Training on EFL Learners' Listening Sub-skills Performance

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## Abstract

The aim of this study is to examine the impact of metacognitive listening strategy instruction on the listening sub-skills performance of the Iranian pre-intermediate EFL learners at the Foreign Language Center, Imam Ali University. The current study has been conducted with 64 participants. They were assigned into two groups randomly, an experimental group (n: 32) and a control group (n: 32). To determine the listening comprehension ability of the participants, a listening comprehension pretest based on the listening sub-skills was administered to the participants before the experiment. Then, the experimental group received an eight-week treatment on metacognitive listening strategies. After the treatment phase, a posttest was given to the participants in both the experimental and control group. The results of the independent t-test showed that there is a statistically significant difference ( $3.29 > 2$ ;  $df = 62$ ) between the posttest scores of the experimental group and the control group. Metacognitive strategy training promoted students' listening comprehension remarkably; therefore, it should be integrated into the listening instruction programs to help language learners become more effective listeners.

Keywords: listening subskill, metacognitive listening strategy, listening performance, EFL

## 1. Introduction

Listening is regarded as the primary channel for language input and acquisition (Peterson, 2001). Listening is an umbrella term because it covers different sub-skills. It is helpful to differentiate between the sub-skills of listening and listening strategies. Field (1998) has argued that the sub-skills of listening are competencies that native speakers possess and second/foreign language learners have to acquire, while strategies are basically compensatory. As learner's ability improves, strategies can and should be put aside, except in emergencies. Since these compensatory strategies are already available in L1, the goal is to ensure that they are transferred into L2 and applied in a controlled way. Williams and Burden (2000) considered learning strategies as operating at a level above skills, and as the executive processes which manage and co-ordinate the skills. In order to understand listening strategies better, particularly metacognitive strategies, first we need to explain and categorize language learning strategies. Oxford (1990) defined learning strategies as "specific actions taken by the learner to make learning easier, faster, more enjoyable, more self directed, more effective, and more transferable to new situations" (p.8). According to O'Malley and Chamot (1990) there are three categories: metacognitive strategies that are concerned with knowledge of learning process, planning for, monitoring and evaluating learning; cognitive strategies that manipulate or transform materials or tasks mentally; and socioaffective strategies that involve social interactions with others or mental control over personal affect. Although metacognitive knowledge is acquired through implicit socialization with experts, it can be enhanced through classroom instruction (Vandergrift, 2004). Zhang and Goh (2006, as cited in Goh, 2008) pointed out that language learners who are aware of the benefits of some listening strategies may use these strategies for promoting their comprehension and overall listening development. Goh (2008) believed that metacognitive instruction can potentially enhance learners' knowledge about their listening and learning processes and help learners to apply appropriate strategies for handling the demands of listening. She reported some positive effects for metacognitive strategy instruction on listening comprehension and stated that this type of training enhances students' level of confidence, creates more motivation and lessens anxiety in learners during the listening process. She also added that less successful listeners potentially benefit to a great extent from the strategy training. Vandergrift (2006) stated that listening tasks and activities that engage learners in using prediction, monitoring, and problem-solving can improve learners' metacognitive knowledge which is vital for learners to develop self-regulated listening. The knowledge of strategies affects listening comprehension directly and positively (Goh & Yasnita, 2006; Coskun, 2010). Yang (2009) mentioned that the use of metacognitive strategies is one of the main features that differentiates successful listeners from less successful ones and he highlighted the importance of metacognition in L2 listening. Listening skill remains the least understood, the least researched, and

historically, the least valued of the four skill that are generally recognized as the keys to 'knowing' a language (Vandergrift, 2006 ; Wilson, 2008). According to Vandergrift (2006) and Goh (2008), further research is necessary to examine the cognitive processes that language learners use for listening and the effect of metacognitive instruction on listening comprehension in different situations to show that training metacognitive strategies is effective in listening performance. The current study was aimed to determine whether metacognitive listening strategy training has any effect on the pre-intermediate level listeners' listening sub-skills performance in the EFL context. If it is confirmed that metacognitive listening strategy training has a positive impact on EFL learners' listening sub-skills performance, then, the foreign language teachers and teacher trainers should pay more attention to it to help the language learners to become effective listeners.

## 2. Method

### 2.1. Participants

The target population of the present study was 170 adult EFL learners who took part in an intensive general English course in the Foreign language Center, Imam Ali University in Tehran. Sixty four learners participated in this study, randomly assigned into an experimental group and a control group, each consisting of 32 participants. The English course lasts six months and meets Saturday through Wednesday (holidays excluded) for 6 hours per day in the morning.

### 2.2. Instrumentation

The present study was conducted using some instruments in the language laboratory as follows:

1. *Key English Test (KET)*
2. *Two parallel forms of a constructed listening comprehension test as the pretest and posttest*
3. *A set of listening tasks and activities*
4. *Metacognitive Awareness Listening Questionnaire (MALQ) by Vandergrift et al. (2006)*
5. *Teaching Learning Strategies Checklist by (NCLRC)*
6. *Vandergrift's (1997) checklist for listening*
7. *Cognitive Academic Language Learning Approach (CALLA) Lesson Plan by Chamot and O'Malley (1994)*

### 2.3. Procedure

The study was conducted through the following stages: First, a standard proficiency test (KET) to homogenize the participants in terms of their English proficiency was administered. This Key English Test (KET) included two sub-tests: a reading-writing part and a listening part. From among 69 participants who took this test, 64 whose scores were one standard deviation above and below the mean were selected as the participants of the experiment. Second, the participants were randomly assigned into two groups: an experimental and a control group, each including 32 participants.

The next stage was selecting listening sub-skills (see Appendix A for the list of listening sub-skills). Fifteen listening sub-skills that were the most agreed-upon listening sub-skills and categorized as communicative sub-skills suggested by researchers in the present literature were selected to be studied (Willis, 1981; Richards, 1983; Weir, 1999; Nunan, 1999; Peterson, 2001; Brown, 2004).

Next, a listening comprehension test to measure the participants' listening ability was administered. The test consisting of 20 items was aimed at both testing listening sub-skills, and measuring the listening comprehension ability of the participants. In order to validate the pretest, KET's listening part was utilized. A correlation of 0.782 was found between the scores of the pretest and the listening part of KET.

The next step of the experiment was the treatment stage that lasted for 8 weeks (2 months). The participants of the study received the treatment in two sessions a week. Since there has been a move away from teaching strategies separately towards embedding them into the language teaching curriculum (Chamot et al., 1994), the metacognitive training employed in this study was integrated into the listening course of the experimental group. An attempt was made to select the appropriate tasks from the listening sources to teach the metacognitive strategies introduced by Vandergrift (1997) as planning, monitoring, evaluation and problem identification strategies. In order to see whether students have taken all the steps needed for a successful listening before they began to listen, the first part of the listening performance checklist was completed by the participants after the pre-listening activities. After listening and making the attempt to perform the listening tasks, students filled in the second part to assess their performance systematically. This self-evaluation allowed learners to adapt their strategies for the next tasks. There was a space for a written reflection at the bottom of the checklist that encouraged learners to personally reflect on the process, and note down what they would do to promote their performance the next time. Cognitive Academic Language Learning Approach (CALLA) strategy training phases were adapted for each listening task. To make sure if the instructor was following the phases of the CALLA model and to maintain consistency, the instructor filled in the teaching learning strategies checklist in each lesson. Metacognitive Awareness Listening Questionnaire (MALQ), a 21-item questionnaire was utilized as a strategy training tool. The items included in the MALQ were discussed with learners related to each listening task to keep students' metacognitive strategy awareness fresh during the training and to help learners to apply, identify and promote learning strategies in a systematic way.

The participants in the control group were exposed to the same listening tasks during 15 sessions. They did not receive any strategy training, discussion, or awareness-raising about metacognitive listening strategies before, during, and after listening to the materials. But the difficult vocabulary or ideas were presented to them as a pre-listening activity. After the treatment stage was completed, the parallel form of the pretest was administered to the participants in both groups as the posttest. This test was the parallel form of the pretest used in the experiment, consisting of 20 items. The objective of items included in the posttest was to test the selected listening sub-skills. The total number of listening sub-skills selected to be tested in the listening posttest was 15. As a matter of fact, the purpose of the posttest was both to measure the listening comprehension proficiency of the experimental and control groups after the treatment and to test the sub-skills of listening ability.

### 3. Results

The independent-samples t-test analysis of the pretest scores showed that there was no significant difference ( $t=-1.23 < 2$ ;  $df = 62$ ) between the mean scores of the experimental and control group students, i.e. the two groups performed fairly similar to each other in the pretest. The result of the independent t-test for pretest scores is presented in Table 3.1.

Table 3.1 Independent samples t-test for pretest scores

	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	.010	.920	-1.234	62	.222	-2.82031	2.28544	-7.38884	1.74822
Equal variances not assumed			-1.234	61.439	.222	-2.82031	2.28544	-7.38967	1.74905

Then the experimental group received treatment on metacognitive listening strategies, whereas the other group did not. To determine any improvement in the experimental group's listening performance compared to that in the control group at the end of the treatment, a posttest was administered to participants in the two groups. The mean value and standard deviation of the experimental group was 72.80 and 8.80, while the mean score and standard deviation of the control group was 65.39 and 9.19, respectively. The descriptive statistics of the posttest is presented in Table 3.2.

Table 3.2. Descriptive Statistics of the posttest scores

	<i>Exp&amp;Cont</i>	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
SCORE	EXP	32	72.8047	8.80518	1.55655
	CONT	32	65.3984	9.19367	1.62523

The analysis of the scores, applying the independent samples t-test, indicated that the mean scores of the experimental group ( $M = 72.80$ ) were significantly different ( $3.29 > 2$ ;  $df = 62$ ) from the control group ( $M = 65.39$ ). In other words, there has been a statistically significant difference between the performances of the two groups and the experimental group outperformed the control group in the listening posttest. The result of the independent t-test for posttest scores is presented in Table 3.3.

Table 3.3. Independent samples t-test for posttest scores

	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	.347	.558	3.291	62	.002	7.40625	2.25038	2.90780	11.90470
Equal variances not assumed			3.291	61.885	.002	7.40625	2.25038	2.90764	11.90486

According to the results of the statistical analyses used in this experiment, it can be concluded that the idea of effectiveness of metacognitive listening strategy training on the EFL learners' listening sub-skills performance was supported.

#### 4. Discussion

The purpose of the present study was to explore the effect of metacognitive listening strategy training on the listening sub-skills performance of the Iranian EFL learners by comparing the test scores of the experimental and control groups at the end of the training program. The results obtained from the data analyses revealed that metacognitive listening strategy training had a great effect on the experimental group students' listening sub-skills performance. The finding of the research is parallel to the findings of the previous studies indicating that metacognitive strategy training facilitates L2 listening comprehension and it is useful for L2 listening improvement (e.g. O'Malley & Chamot, 1990; Anderson, 2002; Vandergrift, 2003; Goh & Yusnita, 2006; Goh, 2008; Yang, 2009; Coskun, 2010). Most L2 learners do not generally regard listening skills as skills that require using strategies and a lack of awareness about the facilitative role of these strategies in the listening process seems to exist (Oxford et al., 1990; Vandergrift, 1999). Thus, English teachers need to employ strategy training in teaching sub-skills and instruct learners about what of metacognition, the role of metacognition in learning, and the ways in which these strategies can be transferred to other listening activities and skills. To be able to succeed in training strategies, teachers need to be familiar with the significance of strategy training in listening performance and their awareness can be enhanced by teacher trainers who are familiar with the benefits of metacognition in teaching listening comprehension. Devoting a certain amount of the class time for helping students approach and settle their problems is an essential part of teaching listening (Field, 1998). Therefore, it is crucial for teachers to help students become more aware of their own learning and potential setbacks probably encountered, and develop their ability to cope with the difficulties repeatedly. It can be concluded that the traditional idea of only exposing EFL learners to listening texts in listening classes should be reconsidered. Instead, strategy training program in which strategies can be embedded to the listening course should be included in the regular listening teaching programs to help learners become more effective listeners which, ultimately, will enable them to acquire another language more efficiently and more quickly. Needless to say, there are limitations relating to the current study. Strategy training was limited to the planning, monitoring, evaluation and problem identification strategies for eight weeks. The focus of the present study was on the sub-skills of conversational listening. The number of listening sub-skills focused on in the present study was limited as well. The population of the study consisted of male learners. The study was limited to the participants from Iranian pre-intermediate EFL learners. The findings of the present study may not be generalizable to all EFL contexts and may support the previous studies in the field, but specific findings may apply only to the population studied. It would be recommended to use different strategy training models and test types to come to sound conclusions. This study was only about the effect of metacognitive strategy training on L2 listening sub-skills performance, so it would be interesting to conduct a study on a possible cause and effect relationship between some other learning strategies (e.g. cognitive and socioaffective) and listening sub-skills performance. This experiment focused on the sub-skills of conversational listening, a similar experiment can be conducted on the sub-skills of listening for academic purposes.

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**Appendix A**  
**Communicative Listening Sub-Skills**

*The following is a set of communicative listening sub-skills, agreed-upon by different researchers in the present literature:*

<i>Number</i>	<i>Sub-Skill</i>	<i>Source(S)</i>
1	Ability to guess the meanings of unfamiliar words from the context and understand the vocabulary	Richards (1983); Weir (1993); Willis(1981); Brown(2004)
2	Listening for gist	Weir (1993); Peterson (2001); Nunan (1999)
3	Recognizing the speaker's attitude to the listener or the subject of the discussion	Richards(1983); Nunan(1999); Willis(1981)
4	Listening and making inferences (about the situation, context, etc.)	Nunan(1999); Richards (1983); Peterson(2001); Willis(1981); Brown(2004)
5	Listening for key words	Richards (1983); Peterson(2001)
6	Ability to recognize and recall important details (listening for details)	Richards (1983); Weir (1993)
7	Drawing correct conclusions about the situation or the general context (relating utterances to their context)	Peterson (2001); Richards(1983; Brown(2004)
8	Ability to identify a speaker's purpose	Richards (1983); Nunan(1999)
9	Ability to recognize functions of stress and intonation in spoken language	Peterson (2001); Richards(1983)
10	Listening for specifics (recognizing specific information)	Peterson (2001); Nunan(1999); Weir(1993); Willis(1981)
11	Recognizing the topic	Peterson (2001); Richards (1983)
12	Identifying the communicative function of utterances in spoken Language	Weir (1993); Richards (1983); Nunan (1999); Brown(2004)
13	Ability to discriminate between distinctive sounds of the target language	Peterson (2001); Richards (1983);Brown(2004)
14	Understanding cohesive devices (recognizing discourse markers) in spoken language	Peterson (2001); Weir (1993); Richards (1983); Willis(1981); Brown(2004)
15	Ability to recognize reduced forms of words in spoken language	Peterson (2001); Richards (1983); Brown(2004)