# The relationship between the level of proficiency and listening comprehension strategy use of Iranian EFL learners

**Mansoureh Sajjadi[1] and Mustafa Zamaniyan[2]**
[1]English Language Department, Islamic Azad University, Abadeh branch, Abadeh, IRAN
[2]English Language Department, Islamic Azad University, Shiraz branch, Shiraz, IRAN

## Abstract

*The present research concentrated on a specific group of students (2nd year) of English translation at Islamic Azad University Abadeh branch, Abadeh, Iran. It's an attempt to discover strategies implemented by the language learners in case they didn't comprehend the point made by the lecturer. The results of the study indicate the pressure the students face when they want to get used to an instruction atmosphere in English. The study also revealed a strong tie between English proficiency level and translating into Farsi while the teacher speaks English and the students are confused because of weak listening comprehension abilities. The SPSS was applied to estimate mean, standard deviation, percentage and T tests. The findings of this work show that listening strategies are not solely exercised in the face of listening skills development.\*

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

## Introduction

Theoretically speaking listening to spoken language is considered to be made up of active and complex processes which give an idea of the level and content of the comprehension. When faced with a spoken input, listeners are involved in complex mental processes in order to analyze the data. During this process the listener concentrates on specific parts of the aural input, creates meaning from what they hear through relating the old information with new information.

It's worth mentioning that input and knowledge are in direct relation with each other; miscomprehension happens and to get meaning some attempt is needed, this is especially true for L2 learners. The complex cognitive processes which are needed by the listeners in order to understand, learn, or retain new information from the input are called listening comprehension module.

From a theoretical point of view, listening comprehension is in fact an active process in which the person concentrates on specific parts of aural input, build meaning from the texts, and link what they hear with the old information they already have. This view, which is based on theory, needs to be proven by experiments so that it is clear what listeners actually do while they are involved in listening tasks. Although the practice of listening has long been employed as a tool for improving competency, but what actually happens during the process of listening comprehension is not clear or well-described. Based on a distinction between receptive and productive skills, listening falls into the former, unlike speaking which a kind of production, and therefore a subjective skill[1], however, as was indicated by Rivers, listening comprehension is a very active

skill. "Far from being an act of reception it involves the construction of a message from phonic material[2]. 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. " averagely, we are likely to listen twice as much as we speak, four times more than we read and five times more than what we write"[3]. Despite what we used to assume new experiments demonstrate that listening goes beyond the simple process of decoding sounds. Rivers in her discussion of speech perception distinguishes three stages[4]. The first stage if the recognition and differentiation of actual sounds with a message from meaningless sound. This identification shows that the receiver knows sounds are part of the elements of the language system. In the second phase the listener tries to classify and segment the sounds so that he/she can recognize them. The third one is the stage of recoding for the sake of sending the auditory message to the long-term storage.

These stages take place really fast and some of them happen at the same time. Whatever the actual processes which take place during the listening comprehension, it is certainly an active process involving cognitive processing. Second language learners who are less proficient because of different reasons such as audio experience with differing accents, small size of vocabulary, limited competence of the syntactic and semantic structures of the language, or other factors which are considered as essential elements for communicative competency should be consistent with listening strategies to help them understand the aural relation. Brown makes a useful comparison between strategies and "battle plans": Strategies are specific methods of approaching a problem or task, modes of operation for reaching

a particular end, determined designs for limiting and implementing certain information[5]. They are "battle plans" in specific contexts that may differ from time to time.

Language strategies have been the central issue of many studies. These strategies are put under two main groups: learning strategies and communication strategies. However relationship between these two groups (Conscious learning strategies (CLS) to meaningful communication strategies (MCS)) casts some problems. However, Brown is aware to state that the two groups can be distinguishes according to learner's motivation in employing the strategy. Ellis has stated that, "Communication strategies are problem oriented[1].

It means the reason the strategies are used by the learner is that he does not have or cannot access the linguistic resources that are needed say what he/she want to". They are "short-term answers" while learning strategies Ellis puts forward are "long-term solutions".

These communication strategies have been under study and research to examine learner's behavior when his production in L2 faces problem. Research concerning what strategies learners use at the time of inability to understand the auditory message is insufficient. Therefore the present research aimed to find the answer to the question what strategies the listener implements to solve the issue when he/she failed to understand the message he/she was listening to. Here the key variable was the listener's level of language competency which influences the listener's choice of strategy. Paterson states that "Strategy use varies with proficiency and so the relationship between strategy use and proficiency level is an important one[6]."

## Literature review

Among the previous studies in the same filed, some of them are directly related to the present study. Nakata (2000) examined the influence of listening strategy training on a number of Japanese EFL learners' listening competence. Results displayed the fact that listening strategy training had stronger effect on perception rather than comprehension, particularly for those students with low scores on the proficiency tests.

In addition to that, some research has presented that teaching L2 listening strategies are of pedagogical values. Mendelsohn has proposed a model of listening course in which there were units on different strategies or features of listening, with training activities contained in them. These training activities were specifically designed which helped the students to learn how to use different signs and testing different strategies. Hagino evaluated the performances to show the helpfulness of listening strategies. For intentional vocabulary learning three kinds of task which focused on meaning were employed in the Japanese EFL language school. He found that the most useful strategy for learning the L2 vocabulary was a bilingual word list. Also, Laviosa studies carefully the way a Cognitive Apprenticeship

Approach (CAA) is used in L2 listening comprehension with Italian pre-advanced learners. This pattern in which teacher's and students' activities were interrelated included such stages as eliciting, modeling, observing, monitoring, scaffolding, and waning assistance. Vandergrift has also described how L2 listeners may make use of strategies in order to improve their learning processes and how teachers can help the improvement of listening strategies[7, 8, 9].

**Objectives of the study:** Above all this study sought to analyze the use of listening strategy at different levels of competent. In particular the present research planned to respond to the following questions. i. What are the strategies students employ as soon as they have problem understanding the speakers? ii. Do you seeany relationship between English proficiency level and strategy use?

## Methodology

**Subjects:** The subjects were 30 sophomore students from oral reproduction class at Islamic Azad university Abadeh branch Abadeh Iran. They all had some 6 years of experience in studying English before going to the university; therefore they were approximately low-intermediate EFL students. 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 included ten multiple-choice questions and the choices were ordered as strongly agree, agree, disagree, strongly disagree. And also the Oxford quick placement test which was first developed by Cambridge University was used to distinguish the student's level of English proficiency.

**Procedures:** Based on these obtained marks students were put into five groups as, elementary, lower intermediate, intermediate, upper intermediate and advanced. The relationship of the marks and the proficiency levels are as follows:
Elementary…………..0 to 39
Lower intermediate…………40 to 49
Intermediate…………….50 to 59
Upper intermediate……………60 to 69
Advanced…………………70 to 100.

Also learners were asked to answer a questionnaire on *Listening Comprehension Strategies* compiled by the examiners in the internet (NUIC, Naresuan University). As it was mentioned the questionnaire included ten multiple-choice questions and the choices were ordered as strongly agree, agree, disagree, and strongly disagree.

Considering the students' behavior when and he/she could not understand the lecturer who was teaching in English, different groups were also planned for a exemplification of students at each proficiency level the results of the discussion in the focus

groups were examined and differentiated. The data acquired was then analyzed implementing the SPSS program for mean, standard deviation, percentage, and t-tests.

## Data analysis

Analyzing the data indicated what the students do when they have problem in understanding the classroom lectures.

As Table-1 indicates the students do not stop listening to the lecture even when they don't comprehend as the mean scores of 3.24 and 3.22 show for '…keep listening…' and '…listen and make note of the words…' While in two of these strategies the students implemented an active listening approach and made an attempt to make sense of the message, they were chosen only as accept. None of the strategies obtained a 1 rating of strongly agree. The students did not appear to be confused by not understanding what they heard x=2.30 '…feel exhausted.'

However, they did not ask questions x=299 'ask the teacher to speak not fast' and *x=2.86* ask questions to help understand.' Surprisingly, students did not agree with the strategy of recording lectures to listen to later' ranked at only x=2.55. The students' activity on applying strategies displays that students clearly are in need of help in how much strategies can support them develop their language skills. Students agreed with daydreaming in class 3.11 think of other things…' and translating, 3.06 describe in Farsi right then,' neither of which is an active approach to improve their listening skills. The second question of the study considered whether the students' use of listening strategies correlated to their level of English proficiency. English proficiency was classified here by ALTE levels acquired from the students' scores on the *Oxford Quick Placement Test.* The students' levels of English were between elementary to advance. The inter correlations are showed in table-2.

**Table-1**
**Meaningful Listening Strategies in line with Performance strategy**

| Technique | Standard deviation | x |
|---|---|---|
| 1. I continue to listen even when I can't comprehend. | .71 | 3.24 |
| 2. I requested my friend to explain in Farsi after class | .71 | 3.22 |
| 3. I continue listening and write down words I hear | .63 | 3.22 |
| 4. I look and read the handouts to support me | .64 | 3.17 |
| 5. I think of other things and read the book, handout Or my friend's notes after each session | .61 | 3.15 |
| 6. I ask my friend to justify in Farsi right then. | .89 | 3.06 |
| 7. I hold up my hand and ask the teacher to speak slower. | .76 | 2.99 |
| 8. I hold up my hand and ask questions to help me understand | .83 | 2.86 |
| 9. I record the lesson and listen again later. | .93 | 2.55 |
| 10.I feel exausted | .81 | 2.30 |

**Table-2**
**Inter-correlations among aural Strategies and English Proficiency**

| | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 | 10 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 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 tied to the students' English proficiency level.

It was discovered that '…requesting a friend to describe in Farsi as intended the relationship is a negative one. The more students depend on translating into Farsi in the classroom and the more exhausted they get, the more it was discovered that they are at a lower proficiency level in English. Quite unexpectedly, the third correlation at a level of .05 significance also tied negatively. This was 'record the lesson and listen again at some other time.' As mentioned earlier this strategy would be expected to be handy in improving language skills. More detailed data needs to be gathered to examine the students' real use of taping and how they use the recording though[10].

## Conclusion

The results from the present study indicate the relationship between the level of English and how well students can listen to their teachers lecturing in English and at the same time translate and taking notes in Farsi, which is usually a problem for students with low listening comprehension abilities. The most important point that can be inferred from the results of the present study is that students don't regularly make use of listening strategies as a way to improve their listening skills. It is better for the students to have direct training and practical courses in implementing particular strategies to develop their listening comprehension. Being exposed to the strategies alone is not enough. During the term the students were given a list consisting of 15 listening tips[11,12], two of which were posted on a notice board outside their classroom. The teacher explained the points and wanted the students pay attention to the attention board which was changed every week. However, based on the findings of this research one cannot say for sure that students are actively applying the strategies. The following are the contributions of the present study: to empirically study the effect of instructing strategy on L2 listening comprehension, to enrich the process-oriented descriptions regarding listening strategy training, and to teach, using the results of the study, students how to employ effective EFL listening strategies. As a result, besides exposure to adequate L2 listening, the students need to be taught how to listen. Finally it is worth mentioning that: The listening skill as Rivers has put forward is an active skill. Students should be taught to respond actively to improve their listening comprehension, and this is can be achieved by teachers' help.

## References

1. Rivers Wilga M., Communicating Naturally in a Second Language. London: Cambridge University Press. **(1983A)**

2. Morley Joan, Aural Comprehension Instruction: Principles and Practices. In Marianne Celce-Murcia (editor), teaching English as a Second or Foreign Language. U.S.: Heinle and Heinle. **(2001)**

3. Rivers wilga M., Speaking in Many Tongues. 3rd edition. London: Cambridge University Press, **(1983B)**

4. Brown H., Douglas. *Principles of Language Learning and Teaching.* 3rd edition. Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Princeton Hall Regents. **(1994)**

5. Ellis, Rod. Understanding Second Language Acquisition. Oxford: Oxford University Press, **(1985)**

6. Paterson, Pat Wilcox. Skills and Strategies for Proficient Listening. In Marianne Celce-Murcia (editor), *teaching English as a Second or Foreign Language.* U.S.: Heinle and Heinle, **(2001)**

7. Vandergrift L., The comprehension strategies of second language (French) listeners: A descriptive study, *Foreign Language Annals,* **30,** 387-409, **(1997)**

8. Vandergrift L., Facilitating second language listening comprehension: acquiring successful strategies, *ELT Journal,* **53,** 168-176 **(1999)**

9. Wagh D.M., Comparative Study of E-Learning and Classical Teaching Methods in Computer Applications, *Research Journal of Recent Sciences,* **3(ISC-2013),** 56-58 **(2014)**

10. Fallah M.A., A Consideration of Operation Rate of Learning Organization Model (LO Model) of Senge in education system of Iran Case study: Vocational High", *Research Journal of Recent Sciences,* **3(4),** 103-111 **(2014)**

11. Intakhab Alam Khan, Effectiveness of Blended Learning for Teaching of English: An Exploratory Study, *Research Journal of Recent Sciences*, **3(3),** 78-85, **(2014)**

12. Global English. www.globalenglish.com retrieved on 12 **(2003)**