

Feasibility of Strategy Instruction in Teaching Listening Comprehension for High-Proficiency and Low-Proficiency Iranian EFL Learners

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Abstract

The present study investigates how effective it is to teach listening comprehension strategies for High-Proficiency and Low-Proficiency Iranian EFL Learners. Two intact classes were selected randomly from a private language institute in Iran. An advanced-level class ($n=33$) was chosen as the High-Proficiency group, and a Lower-intermediate class ($n=32$) was selected as the Low-Proficiency group. Before the start of the semester, both classes were pretested. During the intervention time, the strategies-based approach was adopted by the researcher while teaching the listening comprehension section of the regular curriculum in both classes. At the end of the term, both classes were post-tested. The t -test observed for the difference in the paired means of the scores obtained from the pretests and post-tests turned out to be insignificant for the Lower-intermediate class, while in the paired means comparison of the advanced class the results were revealed as significant.

Key words: High-proficiency; Low-proficiency; Listening comprehension strategies; L2 listening skill

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INTRODUCTION

As the uncontrolled aspect of language, the L2 listening skill seems to be a highly debatable issue in terms of

being practically teachable through strategy instruction. According to Cohen (1998), 'strategies' can be defined as the learner's deliberate attention to his or her comprehension processes in an attempt to construct meaning. In a Strategies-based approach to listening, teachers help learners to enhance their listening comprehension through appropriating a variety of helpful strategies with an aim to automatize them and gradually convert them into skills (Zhang, 2008). This movement from strategies to skills involves a process of turning the conscious into subconscious, which will free the human's brain known to be limited in processing the information.

Unlike reading comprehension, listeners need to tune themselves to the speaker's pace and vocabulary without any opportunity to go back to the uttered words. However, the cognitive view of language learning sees listening comprehension similar to reading comprehension and as a result comparable in terms of "pre" activities, "while" activities, and "post" activities (Brown, 2006).

Recently many researchers (e.g. Chang & Read, 2006; Goh, 2008; Graham, 2003; Vandergrift, 2007; Thompson & Rubin, 1996) increasingly advocate the improvements they saw in their findings as a result of adopting a strategies-based approach to teaching listening comprehension.

Considered as a thinking process, listening strategies can be defined as the practical ways to think about the meanings of what we listen to (Rost, 1991). Rather than being taught, EFL learners are more often than not *tested* in the classroom for their listening comprehension. That is, the product of listening comprehension is focused rather than the process. This is why many EFL learners describe the listening section of their class as a frustrating experience which makes them feel helpless and incompetent. However, it is the responsibility of teachers to teach learners how to listen more effectively and what makes the listening skill difficult for students.

Brown (2001) discussed eight characteristics of spoken language which make listening comprehension difficult: clustering, redundancy, reduced forms, performance variables, colloquial language, rate of delivery, prosodic features, and the two-way nature of listening.

In order to adopt a strategies-based approach to listening comprehension, teachers need to first know what strategies the learners already know. Drawing on researches on reading strategies, many researchers (O'Malley, Chamot, & Kupper, 1989) use verbal reports and talk-aloud to collect data about the strategies their learners make use of; while others (Anderson, 1991; Oxford, 1993) believe that listening strategies are not reportable as they occur in real time, questioning the validity of the appropriate instrumentation for such a kind of research. Some researchers like Goh (1997), on the other hand, collected and made an analysis of the learners' self-report diaries written about their own listening challenges.

1. METHOD AND PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

As the review of the related literature reveals, there is a lack of encouraging evidence for the feasibility of a strategies-based approach for listening comprehension for EFL learners of different proficiency levels. This study aims to explore the feasibility of strategic instruction and its impact on listening comprehension scores in Iranian the EFL context. In particular, the study addresses the following research question:

Does listen strategic instruction prove helpful for both High-Proficiency and Low-Proficiency Iranian EFL Learners?

The hypothesis was that listening strategic instruction would prove helpful for both High-Proficiency and Low-Proficiency Iranian EFL Learners and that the participants of both classes would perform better in the post-treatment tests.

1.1 Participants

By flipping a coin, two intact classes were selected randomly from a private language institute (one as a Low-Proficiency group and the other as the High-Proficiency group). Having taken a solid placement test, the students were already matched in terms of their proficiency levels. While one of the classes consisted of 33 advanced-level students in the 17-29 age range, the other included 32 lower intermediate students in the 16-27 age range.

1.2 Design and Instrumentation

1.2.1 Pretreatment

Before the start of the treatment, both of the classes were given a pretest to check their level in listening comprehension. The tests that were used were previously piloted, quite modified and suitable for their levels. They

consisted of five to seven minute audio file followed by a 15-item multiple-choice test and five true/false questions.

1.2.2 Treatment

During the whole semester, the strategies-based approach was adopted by the researcher while teaching the listening comprehension section of the regular curriculum in both classes. The whole treatment period consisted of 24 ninety-minute sessions, lasting for three months. Drawing on Oxford's (1990) model of L2 listening strategies as well as Brown's (2001) micro skills of listening, the syllabus was designed so that the following listening strategies could be taught and practiced through exercises during the treatment. The listening strategies covered, which I did my utmost to be as concrete and practical as possible, are as follows:

- a) In advance, set a predefined purpose for your listening and then pay attention to those parts of the listening that are relevant to your purpose.
- b) Pick out long stretches of language rather than word by word.
- c) Try to retain chunks of words in your memory.
- d) Don't wait passively for the input to come. *You* go for it. Tap your real world knowledge. Anticipate what you want to listen for by making a relationship between what you hear and what you already know.
- e) On the basis of the speakers' exchanges, try to infer the situation, the relationship between the speakers, and their purposes and tones. Also try to make a (possibly cause and effect) relationship between events.
- f) Predict what will come next and then try to check if it is correct based on the next sentences.
- g) Not everything you hear contains information. Distinguish between the important keywords and phrases you hear from the redundant ones that should be ignored such as the speaker's false starts and repetitions.
- h) Monitor your own comprehension continually.
- i) Look for nonverbal cues or the speakers' body language.
- j) Write down as much as notes that you can while listening.

Both classes were gradually presented with the above-mentioned strategies and all of the listening exercises were practiced with a focus on the strategies. Explaining the strategies in Persian or English, I tried to assure that each student individually understood them. Both classes were in a fairly similar age range, and seemed to have little problem in understanding the strategies.

1.2.3 Post-Treatment

Quite parallel listening comprehension tests were given to both classes at the end of the term, which was previously adapted to their levels. That is, they involved a six to eight minute audio file followed by a 15-item multiple-choice test and five true/false questions.

2. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

2.1 The Lower-Intermediate Class

The result from comparing the pretreatment and post-treatment of the Lower-intermediate class, which was obtained by running a paired sample *t*-test, is as follows:

Table 1
Paired Samples Statistics

	Mean	N	Std. deviation	Std. error mean
Low-class pretreatment	15.2344	32	2.14301	.37883
post-treatment	15.2734	32	2.16865	.38337

Table 3
Paired Samples Test

		Paired Differences					<i>t</i>	<i>df</i>	Sig. (2-tailed)
		Mean	Std. deviation	Std. error mean	95% confidence interval of the difference				
					Lower	Upper			
Low class	Pretreatment & post-treatment	-.03906	.72986	.12902	-.30221	.22408	-.303	31	.764

Note. The *T* value= -.303, degrees of freedom=31, the significance is .764.

At the $\alpha = 0.05$ level of significance, there exists enough evidence to conclude that there is not a statistically significant mean score gain from the pretreatment scores of post-treatment scores. $t(31) = -.303$, $p > .05$. Since the *p*-value is more than the pre-specified alpha level (.05) we will conclude that the mean difference between the pretreatments and post-treatment is not statistically significantly different from 0.

2.2 The Advanced-Level Class

The descriptive statistics from comparing the pretreatment and post-treatment of the advanced class, which was obtained by paired sample *t*-test, is as follows:

Table 6
Paired Samples Test

		Paired differences					<i>t</i>	<i>df</i>	Sig. (2-tailed)
		Mean	Std. deviation	Std. error mean	95% confidence interval of the difference				
					Lower	Upper			
Adv. class	Pretreatment & pos-treatment	-.76515	1.29594	.22559	-1.22467	-.30563	-3.392	32	.002

Note. The *T* value= -3.392, degrees of freedom=32, the significance is .002.

At the $\alpha = 0.05$ level of significance, there is a statistically significant mean score gain from the pretreatment scores of post-treatment scores. $t(32) = -3.392$, $p > .05$. Since the *p*-value is less than the pre-specified alpha level (.05) we will conclude that the mean difference between the pretreatments and post-treatment is statistically significantly different from 0.

As shown on the table, the pretreatment mean is just a little lower than that of the post-treatment.

The paired sample correlation between the two variables proved a highly strong positive one:

Table 2
Paired Samples Correlations

	N	Correlation	Sig.
Low-class pretreatment & post-treatment	32	.943	.000

The results of the Paired Samples *T* Test is presented in the following:

Table 4
Paired Samples Statistics

	Mean	N	Std. deviation	Std. error mean
Adv. class Pretreatment	15.6515	33	2.28098	.39707
Post-treatment	16.4167	33	2.10901	.36713

As shown on the table, the pretreatment mean is lower than that of the post-treatment.

The paired sample correlation between the two variables proved as a strong positive one:

Table 5
Paired Samples Correlations

	N	Correlation	Sig.
Adv. class Pretreatment & post-treatment	33	.829	.000

And here are the results of the Paired Samples *T* Test in the advanced class:

CONCLUSION AND PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATIONS

The *t*-test observed for the difference in the paired means of the scores obtained from the pretreatments and post-tests turned out to be -.303 for the Lower-intermediate class, which is insignificant while in the paired means comparison

of the advanced class the results were significant (-3.392). In other words, scores appeared to be higher only in the advanced level, suggesting that the strategies-based approach to teaching listening comprehension did not have a significant impact on the listening comprehension of lower intermediate participants, while it did have a significant effect on the advanced-level students. To put it simply, the strategies-based approach to teaching listening comprehension only worked for the advanced-levels students. The results appeared to be in sharp contrast with Bozorgian and Pillay (2013) where the Lower-intermediate participants were found to improve in their post-test scores.

The results suggest that although all of the learners in both classes were taught the principles of strategy use, the learner in the lower-proficiency group seem to find some difficulty in applying this knowledge while performing the posttest. One reason seems to be that some of the strategies were too abstract for the students to digest and, far more importantly, to put into action.

Although this research cannot be considered as being absolutely successful in proving the hypothesis, it has been a successful step in paving the way to other similar research questions on strategy instruction in the listening comprehension.

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