

Assessing Algerian EFL Learners' Metacognitive Strategy Use in Listening Comprehension

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Abstract

Despite the importance attributed to the teaching of English in Algeria which covers the diverse language building blocks namely speaking, writing, reading and listening, students experience constant difficulties with the listening skills. In reality, the listening instruction provided fails to include the strategies that help less-effective learners to understand the oral input with confidence and without any anxiety. Therefore, with the perspective to investigate how listening tasks are processed by EFL learners, an assessment of this proficiency was achieved via adopting a listening test, a questionnaire and a retrospective interview. The results of this investigation helped to uncover the strategies used by Algerian students to overcome their learning difficulties and process the aural input.

Keywords: assessment, EFL learners, metacognitive strategies, listening skills

1. Introduction

Listening skill is considered as a very complex and highly demanding activity that involves an ongoing problem-solving processing to construct meaning. This is why it is taught in EFL classes as a building block beside reading, writing and speaking skills. In fact, it may not be possible to learn the English language without listening as it provides foreign language learners with language input, which in turn plays a crucial role in language development (Darti & Asmawati, 2017; Gilakjani & Ahmadi, 2011). However, the listening competency is not appropriately taught but tested which makes the learners' task challenging and may lead to anxiety and demotivation when unable to decipher the message transmitted in the target language.

With reference to the literature review on listening comprehension, it is underlined that EFL learners want to be able to understand what people are saying to them in English either face-to-face, on TV or on the radio. Yet, this is not easy since "the way people speak is often

significantly different from the way they write” (Harmer, 2007, p. 133). Besides, foreign language learners find themselves confronted to a multitude of difficulties hindering their understanding of the oral input. These listening problems are generally associated with text characteristics, interlocutor characteristics, task characteristics, listener characteristics and process characteristics (Underwood, 1989; Rubin, 1994; Goh, 2000; Hamouda, 2013; Walker, 2014). Other studies gave more details about the challenges faced by EFL learners in Listening such as Astika and Kurniawan (2020), Ha and Ngo (2021) and Qiu Y. and Luo W. (2022). Some of these potential challenges encompass “culture, differences in accents, foreign vocabulary, length and speed in listening and lack of concentration” (Handayani et al., 2023, p. 194).

Besides, the literature addressing listening comprehension also tackled the learning strategies concept as a way to overcome the potential issues linked to this skill. In fact, the notion of learner techniques or strategies assisting second and foreign language acquisition emerged in the work introduced by Rubin (1975) and Stern (1975). Besides, this notion contrasts with the idea that “some people have an ‘ear’ for language or that some individuals have an inherent ability for language learning” (O’Malley & Chamot, 1990, p. 02). Thus, the notion of learning strategies suggests that competent individuals are good at language learning because of special ways of processing information. It suggests also that these strategies could be learnt by others who had not yet uncovered them by themselves. Consequently, this research gears at discovering how the oral input is processed by Algerian EFL learners and what strategies are implemented to perform well in the listening tasks.

2. Historical Overview About Listening Skills

Listening comprehension is the most common activity in our daily life. It is also crucial for obtaining comprehensible input that is required for language learning. Thus, in order to get insight into the listening skill, its historical overview is addressed.

In fact, before reaching the actual state, listening comprehension had long been regarded as a passive skill and had been treated as “the Cinderella” (Flowerdew & Miller, 2005, p. 11 with reference to Nunan, 2002, p. 238) of the other skills: speaking, reading and writing. Researchers also considered listening as an ability that would develop without assistance. It had undergone in the past few decades many changes with the diverse teaching approaches developed over the years.

Indeed, arguments for listening comprehension began to be voiced in the mid-1960’s by Rivers who has been “long an advocate for listening comprehension” (Morley, 2001, p. 70). The latter, had enough foresight to say that “speaking does not of itself constitute communication unless what is being said is comprehended by another person” (Rivers, 1966, p. 196) and that “teaching the comprehension of spoken speeches is therefore of primary importance if the aim of communication is to be reached” (ibid., p. 204).

Then, gradually, more attention has been devoted to listening comprehension. In the 1970’s, the status of the latter began to change from being incidental and peripheral to a status of central importance mainly after the emergence of Krashen’s input hypothesis (1981).

Instructional programs expanded their focus on pragmatic skills to include listening as well as reading, writing and speaking. During the 1980's as researchers became increasingly interested in exploring the intricacies of this complex skill, more research, theory building and curriculum development on listening were realised. Throughout the 1990's, attention to listening in language teaching increased and aural comprehension in second or foreign language acquisition became an important area of study.

In this framework, it is necessary to mention that most of the studies conducted on listening were concerned either with the product of this skill or its process. The ones that addressed the product of listening investigated the level of success in listening comprehension. A review of studies conducted in this context focused mostly on listening tests such as listening cloze, gap filling activities, dictation and translation (Buck, 1992; Hughes, 1989). Yet, because product oriented studies did not provide details about listeners' thinking processes, a shift towards the process of listening gained the attention of researchers such as Rubin (1988); O'Malley et al. (1989); Bacon (1991); Thompson and Rubin (1996); Vandergrift (1996); Goh (1997); Goh (2002a); Vandergrift (2003b); Goh and Taib (2006); Graham and Macaro (2008); Vandergrift and Tafaghodtari (2010); Coşkun (2010), Bozorgian and Alamdari (2013), and Goh and Hu (2014).

Listening is now considered as an active skill involving many processes however, much work remains to be done since this skill, as Byrnes (1984, p. 318) characterises it, as a "highly complex problem-solving activity that can be broken down into a set of distinct sub-skills". In addition, Goh (1997, p. 161) stresses the fact that the research available on listening is insufficient comparing with other skills. She said in this respect: "there are fewer insights about the process of listening and the way it is learnt". Similarly, Richards (1989, p. 189) stated that "there is little direct research on second language listening comprehension".

Therefore, on the ground of what has been mentioned before and with the perspective to get insight into the way EFL learners process the oral information transmitted to them, an assessment of their listening proficiency is conducted.

3. Methodology

In the present study the application of mixed research methodology was chosen. This word entails the involvement of "different combinations of qualitative and quantitative research either at the data collection or at the analysis levels" (Dörnyei, 2007, p. 24). As a matter of fact, the complex nature of the listening skills and the complex processes through which learning takes place call for both quantitative and qualitative approaches in data collection and analysis. On the other hand, the mere statistical interpretation of the data might hide an important aspect of information processing. Thus, a better understanding of the learning process can be achieved only if the numerical data are backed up with qualitative one. Accordingly, the current investigation involved quantitative approach, encompassing a test design as well as an adapted version of Vandergrift's et al. (2006) Metacognitive Awareness Listening Questionnaire (MALQ) questionnaire. Then, in the qualitative approach, interviews were implemented with the aim to collect supplementary data to support the quantitative one.

3.1 The Setting

As it has been stated previously, the present research focuses on uncovering the metacognitive strategies Algerian EFL learners use to face listening difficulties. Thus, the investigation was conducted in Algeria at the level of University of Algiers2.

3.2 The Subjects

The population of the present investigation comprises twenty-five (25) Algerian undergraduate students belonging to first year English LMD. The population is a mixture of male and female young students aged between eighteen (18) and twenty-five (25) years old belonging to different social and cultural backgrounds. Additionally, all the members of the population are multilingual. They speak at least two of the following three languages: Arabic, French, Berber besides the English language which they have been studying for approximately seven years.

3.3 Research Tools

With reference to what has been mentioned before, and with the perspective to ensure validity of the findings, we made use in this research of multiple techniques to gather the quantitative and qualitative data related to EFL learners' use of metacognitive strategies in. Particularly, we employed "multiple lines of sight" (Bruce, 2001, p. 04) like a written test, an adapted version of Vandergrift's et al. (2006) MALQ questionnaire besides the interviews. This can be explained by the fact that by combining diverse lines of sight, "researchers obtain a better, more substantive picture of reality; a richer, more complete array of symbols and theoretical concepts; and a means of verifying many of these elements" (op.cit).

As concerns the listening test, it comprised three activities. In the first one, the informants were required to put the sentences in the correct order relying on the information presented to them. They were expected to rely mainly on direct attention, personal knowledge and problem-solving strategies to answer this activity. Concerning the second listening activity, the participants were required to put a tick on the correct answer with reference to the information provided. They were also assumed to make use of some metacognitive strategies particularly personal knowledge and direct attention strategies. As far as the last activity is concerned, the students were expected to fill in the gaps with words extracted from the audio recording to which they were exposed. They were required to make use of one of the five metacognitive strategies aforementioned. Therefore, one point was allotted to each item so that the maximum score would be 20.

Regarding the MALQ questionnaire, adopted from Vandergrift et al. (2006, p. 462), it consisted of twenty-one (21) randomly ordered items related to metacognitive strategies in L2 listening comprehension. It was administered to the subjects of the study as a tool to measure the perceived use of the five (05) metacognitive strategies underlined by Vandergrift (1997) and Goh (2002a) involving problem solving, planning and evaluation, mental translation, person knowledge and direct attention. The MALQ was designed in the form of "Likert scales" (Bell, 2005, p. 138). The latter was originally devised by Likert in 1932 to discover the strength of feeling or attitude towards a given statement or series of statements.

With reference to this scale, the highest category chosen reflects the strength of agreement on the given statement.

A retrospective interview had also been used in this investigation to collect information about EFL students' consciousness in relation to aural strategy use while engaging in listening tasks. That is the informants were expected to reflect verbally on the listening task they had already listened to by answering few questions in relation to it. Therefore, the elucidation of the term "retrospective" as used by Anderson and Vandergrift (1996, p. 4) is necessary. According to them "if an informant tries to analyse or interpret his or her thought processes, during a task or after a task has been completed, it becomes self-observation, i.e.; retrospective".

4. Results

Regarding the test scores achieved by the informants, they revealed a very low score. Indeed, the mean score realized by the twenty-five (25) participants was equal to 10.56. This implies that the subjects seem facing comprehension difficulties. Besides, based on the scores realised and with reference to what has been stated before that the listening test was intended to uncover the metacognitive strategies used in the comprehension process, the only explanation that can be provided is linked to metacognitive strategy use. In fact, this bad performance indicates that the subjects either ignore the existence of metacognitive strategies to help them in solving listening comprehension problems or they are aware of the listening metacognitive strategies but misuse them which led to these low scores.

The results obtained from the MALQ responses revealed that Algerian EFL students made use of the five metacognitive strategies (namely problem solving, planning and evaluation, mental translation, personal knowledge and direct attention) in a correlated way. The descriptive statistics analysis of the MALQ unveiled variance in strategy use. For example, the mean scores reflected in mental translation ($M=2.96$) and direct attention ($M=3.89$) factors are less than problem solving ($M=4.97$), planning and evaluation ($M=4.38$) and personal knowledge ($M=4.08$). They seem also to "orchestrate" between the diverse strategies underlying those processes. In fact, they correlate between inferencing and monitoring strategies with those used to "prepare and... evaluate the results of the listening efforts" besides the ones implemented to assess task difficulty as well as "concentrate and stay on it" (Vandergrift et al., 2006, p. 451) in addition to translating.

Additionally, with the intention to collect information about the study participants' consciousness in relation to aural strategy use while engaging in listening tasks, retrospective interviews were conducted which required the subjects of the survey to reflect verbally on the listening task they had already listened to by answering few questions in relation to it. Furthermore, the retrospective interviews were restricted to only ten (10) members of the subjects of study as the transcription, coding and analysis procedures are time consuming. In fact, the results retrieved from the analysis of the corpora prior instruction revealed that 60% of the participants found the task hard to achieve. They attributed this difficulty to diverse reasons namely fast talk (30%), difficult words (20%), noise (10%) and loss of concentration (10%) while 30% expressed no difficulties. As far as the strategies employed to the accomplishment of the test, the students made use of diverse strategies and focused mainly on

direct attention (100%) and personal knowledge (40%). Besides, the majority of the students expressed their satisfaction of their implementation in the task processing.

5. Discussion

The only explanation that can be attributed to the results achieved by the subjects of study in the test is that their knowledge as EFL students is not well developed as far as strategy use is concerned. Moreover, though their scores seem to be positive, they did not reflect a comprehensive awareness of the strategies implemented to reach those results. In fact, they might have adopted some strategies to handle the task, yet they made use of them in an haphazard way. This can be returned back to the complexity of the listening skill which makes it “a hard job” (Brown, 2006, p. 01) for EFL learners to have a comprehensive explanation to it. Accordingly, O’Malley and Chamot (1985, p. 561), describe those students as “learners without directions or opportunity to review their progress, accomplishments and future directions”. Consequently, EFL learners should be equipped with effective listening strategies by making them “aware of the mental processes that are involved in listening” (Abdulmalik et al., 2013, p. 57). Learners need also to pay more attention to the message transmitted to them in the target language. This measure can enhance students’ listening comprehension abilities, not only to succeed in the test but also to perform well in real life communication with English native speakers.

Furthermore, the results of the descriptive statistics analysis of the MALQ unveiled that the informants relied on certain strategies to overcome listening difficulties, but used them with discrepancy which reflect that they lack awareness about how to use them. Therefore, a need to raise students’ awareness about those strategies is necessary to help them control their listening process, improve their performance and make them become autonomous learners. This is due to the fact that “metacognitive strategies help learners to focus, plan, and evaluate their progress as they move toward communicative competence, by assessing how they are learning and by planning for future learning task” (Oxford, 1990, p. 16). Besides, the results of MALQ indicate that the 25 participants shared the use of some strategies and disregarded others. For instance, problem solving and planning and evaluation strategies were the preferred ones whereas mental translation was hardly used. The latter represents “strategies that listeners must learn if they are to become skilled listeners” (Vandergrift et al., 2006, p. 450).

Concerning the retrospective interviews carried out in the present study, it required the subjects of the survey to reflect verbally on the listening task they had already listened to by answering few questions in relation to it. The results retrieved from the interviews gave us an insight about the task difficulty, the diverse problems encountered, the strategies adopted to overcome the difficulties in addition to the students’ impression about their performance. Indeed, the majority of the participants interviewed found the listening test difficult and could not manage to solve it easily. Many of them attributed their problems to their low listening ability and to other factors hindering their listening such as fast talk, difficult words, noise and loss of concentration. Such attributions indicate a sense of language weakness and ignorance of the right way to remedy this deficiency “which could easily result in their

becoming demotivated, resigned to being less effective listeners” (Graham, 2006, p. 178). Thus, developing strategies to overcome those difficulties is highly required to avoid motivation loss from the students’ part.

6. Conclusion

In the case of English language learning, listening to a language that one is not familiar with constitutes a hard work. In fact, though listening represents a crucial skill for learning any language, its complex nature makes it a challenging affair for both the learners and the teachers. It requires the learners to be guided and assisted in their efforts to reach success, and the teachers are expected to furnish the appropriate measures to achieve the teaching goals. However, when doing so, they find themselves testing the students’ listening capacities instead of supplying them with the strategies that may facilitate their learning. This makes of learners passive recipients of instruction as the learning is centred on the teacher.

This research provides empirical evidence that EFL learners facing listening comprehension difficulties may benefit from metacognitive strategy use efficiently if they receive an appropriate treatment in that sense. They may even extend their metacognitive strategy use to reach not only listening as a skill but other skills which are crucial to language learning such as reading, writing and speaking. Likewise, this investigation offers suggestions to language teachers, who are concerned with developing EFL learners’ listening skill, to review their method of teaching. Instead of testing EFL learners on listening, it is preferable to involve them in consciousness-raising tasks helping them to overcome their listening obstacles as well as empowering learners with strategies helping them to learn both inside and outside the academic contexts.

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