

A Perceptive Determination of Self-Perceived Listening Comprehension Strategies Employed by Saudi English-major University Undergraduates

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Abstract

This cross-sectional survey aims at investigating Saudi English-major university undergraduates about their self-perceived listening comprehension strategies they employ to comprehend listening texts. To generate data for this empirical study, a 5-point strongly agree to strongly disagree Likert-scale questionnaire has been adapted and standardized steps were followed to ensure the reliability and validity of the instrument. Arabic version of the questionnaire was administered to randomly selected male and female Saudi English-major university undergraduates studying at foreign languages department during their regular teaching session to generate data. Descriptive analyses were run to calculate percentages, means and standard deviation. The results inform that the participants of this study prefer to use cognitive strategies the most followed by metacognitive strategies. Socio-affective strategies were reported to be used the least by this group. This trend offers valuable insights into the fact that Saudi English as a foreign language (EFL) learners resort to bottom-up strategies more frequently as compared to the top-down ones. It is recommended that Saudi EFL learners should be made aware of the significance of these strategies to enhance their listening comprehension. English language teachers should provide their students with appropriate skills of how to listen, retrospect on listening process and concentrate on practicing metacognitive and socio-affective strategies during their listening tasks. It is also recommended that teachers should provide their students with this confidence and courage to talk about their listening problems as well as the strategies they have used to tackle those problems.

Keywords: cognitive, listening comprehension strategies, metacognitive, perceptions, socio-affective

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Introduction

It has also been reported that despite these efforts, English language teaching has not shown the desired results and Saudi EFL learners fail to achieve the desired proficiency in the target language including oral skills (Javid, 2010; Al-Seghayer, 2011). A growing mass of research has suggested that failure of achieving the desired proficiency in oral skills by Saudi university undergraduates is caused by factors like the weak school graduates who join universities, inappropriate curricula, faulty teaching methodologies, non-supportive environment and lack of motivation on learners' part etc. (Rababah, 2005; Tanveer, 2007; Javid, Farooq & Ajmal, 2012; Pathan, 2013). It is also reported that in addition to the above-mentioned factors, lack of using appropriate listening comprehension strategies by Saudi EFL learners is another reason for their weak oral skills.

Literature Review

Vandergrift (2010) has stated that out of the four basic language skills, listening is the most difficult to study and thus the least understood. Though proper comprehension of this skill is very important for effective English language learning as it facilitates ESL/EFL learners to internalize various language components when they are exposed to sufficient language input through listening skills (Brown, 2001; Peterson, 2001). Rost (2001) has stated that "a key difference between more successful and less successful acquirers relates in large part to their ability to use listening as a means of acquisition" (p. 94). O'Malley, Chamot, and Kupper (1989) have reported that "listening comprehension is an active and conscious process in which the listener constructs meaning by using cues from contextual information and from existing knowledge, while relying upon multiple strategic resources to fulfill the task requirement (p.19)." Therefore, it transpires that listening is a complicated activity that is neither easy to exercise nor possible without extensive mental exertion (Holden, 2004; Serri, Boroujeni, & Hesabi, 2012).

This realization of listening skills as an active process has raised an interest among researchers to identify listening strategies and their use by EFL learners. It has been found out that efficient listeners make an effective use of listening strategies to better understand listening texts and effective use of these strategies "if identified and described, can be taught to less successful learners to better their learning". Listening research of this type has produced "several, but similar taxonomies of listening strategies" as reported by Kassem (2015, P. 156). Review of relevant research has informed that many studies have been conducted to identify and classify listening strategies used by EFL/ESL learners (see for example Vandergrift, 2003; Liu, 2008). A second set of studies has attempted to investigate the use listening strategies among less proficient and more proficient language learners (Bidabadi & Yamat, 2011; Tavakoli, Shahraki, & Rezazadeh, (2012). Despite the fact that listening is an important skill, ESL/EFL learners usually find it the most difficult language skill (Graham, 2003). Vandergrift (2007) has suggested that one probable reason of this difficulty lies in the fact that usually EFL learners are not taught how listening skills can be learned effectively. He has further explained that in most of the textbooks, majority of listening skills activities do not engage the learners in comprehensively understanding the listening passages which leads to learners' inability to proper comprehension. Moreover, the situation gets rather worse as Stahr (2009) has revealed that

spoken language is characterized by assimilation as well as unclear articulation, and lexical units are not necessarily as clearly marked as in written text; this

lack of clarity of spoken language makes word segmentation an extremely difficult task for L2 listeners (p. 582).

Review of relevant research has offered valuable insights into the probable factors which negatively affect listening comprehension (Underwood, 1989; Doff & Christopher, 2004; Piolat, 2008). The first factor is ‘the speed of delivery’ on which the learners do not have any control. Secondly, another major problem is that the learners do not enjoy the facility to have words repeated. Thirdly, the learners’ poor vocabulary size also hinders listening comprehension as usually it is not probable that the speakers always use words the listener knows. When listeners are encountered with these unfamiliar words, their attention is diverted from listening to figure out the meaning of the difficult vocabulary and resultantly they miss the next part of the listening text. Next, identification of the signal words used by the speakers to move from one point to another is another major factor in this regard. The situation worsens if the listener is unable to see the facial expressions. Fifth factor is the challenge that listeners experience in concentrating in the target language. This lack of concentration due to several factors hinders comprehension. It has also been reported that comprehension is improved when the topic is of their interest which increase their concentration. Sixth factor is related to their learning habits they have been exposed to in the classroom; for example, their overemphasis on understanding the meaning of each and every word that resultantly affect the use of top down strategies in listening. This happens due to the teachers’ expectation from the learner to understand every word while listening; thus, creating anxiety among the learners, which Noro (2006) has declared as the psychological reality of the construct of ‘listening stress’, and they are unable to keep track of all the information during their listening activities. The last factor that has been highlighted is the learners’ lack of the contextual knowledge. It has been reported that though the learners are able to grasp the main idea, they find it difficult to understand the whole meaning in the listening text. It has been suggested that “in order to overcome these listening comprehension problems, learners need to develop techniques known as ‘listening strategies’” (Ghoneim, 2013, p. 102). This difficulty causes anxiety among ESL/EFL learners while handling listening texts (Elkhafafi, 2005) which Noro (2006) has declared as the psychological reality of the construct of ‘listening stress’.

It has been found out that listening comprehension strategies are the pedagogical activities and techniques which play an important role in improving the comprehension of listening input and its recall (National Capital Language Resource Center, 2004). According to Vandergrift (2007), listening comprehension strategies “refer to the strategies that listeners consciously or unconsciously use in order to understand, analyze, and interpret a text” (p. 101). It has been further stated that effective use of appropriate listening strategies facilitates understanding listening texts especially in the early stages of learning a language; thus, making language learning process more relevant and interesting to the learners (Ghoneim, 2013). Review of relevant literature reveals that listening strategies have been classified into three kinds; i.e., “cognitive (mental activities for manipulating the language to accomplish a task), metacognitive (mental activities for directing language learning), and socio-affective (activities involving interaction or affective control in language learning)” Nowrouzi, Sim, Zareian, & Nimehchisalem, 2014, p. 35).

It has been reported that cognitive strategies are exploited to better understand linguistic input and have complete information about data. One example of cognitive strategy is to guess the

meaning of unknown words from the context. The cognitive strategies help the learners to understand the listening texts and store input in short term memory for immediate use or even keep it in long-term memory for later access. In this strategy, understating begins with the reception of listening content which is then analyzed by exploiting the organization-sounds and words as a process of decoding. It has been stated that this kind of strategy is basically a problem-solving technique used by ESL/EFL learners to efficiently deal with the listening texts and increase its comprehension. Repetition, guessing, memorizing, summarizing and piecing together of details are the examples of cognitive strategies. Metacognition has been defined as ‘thinking about one’s own thinking’. Vandergrift (2003) has posited that metacognitive strategies are used twofold by the advanced listeners as compared to elementary listeners. Metacognitive strategies keep the learners conscious during the listening tasks. Holden (2004) has suggested that these strategies facilitate listening comprehension by planning, monitoring and assessing the information collected related to the listening text as pre-listening activities. A major benefit of these strategies is the enhanced ability of learners to achieve their attention back if they lose it while listening to the text. Nelson and Conner (2008) have explained the execution of these strategies with the help of an analogy. For example, there is a learner who finds difficulty in establishing links between various concepts of a story. The use of some graphic organizer like a mind map or concept drawing to link various concepts of the story will be the exploitation of metacognition to accomplish the listening task effectively. Devine (1993) has clarified the above strategies by providing an example. According to him “skimming a text for key information involves using a cognitive strategy, while assessing the effectiveness of skimming for gathering textual information would be a metacognitive strategy” (p. 112). Bingol, Celik, Yildiz, and Mart (2014) have stated that ‘socio-affective strategy’ “ensures and promotes positive emotional reactions and perspective of language learning” (p. 2). Vandergrift (2003) has defined socio-affective strategies as the ones employed by listeners in the form of collaboration with peers and friends, to verify comprehension and to minimize anxiety to ensure better listening comprehension. The example of socio-affective strategies is “to choose to rehearse a telephone conversation in L2 with another student in order to develop confidence, or reward themselves with a doughnut when they successfully complete some task in the target language” (Bingol, Celik, Yildiz, & Mart, 2014, p. 2). Habte-Gabr (2006) has also reiterated that these strategies include stimulating learning by building better learning relationship among the teachers and learners. Furthermore, it is also important for learner to know how to reduce the anxiety, show enhanced confidence and keep high motivation to maximize listening comprehension.

Research Objective

This cross-sectional survey study has attempted to identify the perceptions of Saudi English-major university undergraduates (SEUU) studying at Foreign Languages Department (FLD) at Taif University regarding the use of metacognitive, cognitive and socio-affective listening comprehension strategies they use to understand various listening texts.

Research Questions

This research study is governed by the following research questions:

1. What are the self-perceived cognitive listening comprehension strategies (CLCS) used by SEUU studying at FLD?

2. What are the self-perceived metacognitive listening comprehension strategies (MLCS) used by SEUU studying at FLD?
3. What are the self-perceived socio-affective listening comprehension strategies (SLCS) used by SEUU studying at FLD?

Research Design

This cross-sectional study has a survey design in which 118 SEUU studying at FLD have been investigated using quantitative paradigms. A Likert-scale strongly agree-strongly disagree questionnaire has been administered to the participants to record their perceived preferences of various cognitive, metacognitive and socio-affective listening comprehension strategies.

Instrumentation

The researcher has reviewed several similar studies to develop an appropriate instrument to record the perceptions of the participants of this survey (See for example Cohen, Oxford, & Chi, 2005, Vandergrift, 2003, 2007; Nowrouzi, Tam, Nimehchisalem, & Zareian, 2014; Kassem, 2015). The instrument used by Nowrouzi, Tam, Nimehchisalem, and Zareian (2014) has been adapted for this survey. The researcher sent this questionnaire to three senior professors from Taif University for their expert opinion about the appropriacy of the content of the instrument. The feedback from these experts suggested to add some more listening comprehension strategies. Their recommended items were incorporated in the relevant sections of the questionnaire that was again sent to the same experts for face validity. All their comments have been addressed to and the final questionnaire comprised of 38 items with an addition of 6 items in the original instrument. It was translated into Arabic language before proceeding for pilot study. It was done to ensure that the participants understand the content well. The Arabic version of the questionnaire was pilot tested with 19 students from the same academic context. Cronbach Alpha was run to establish reliability. The final version contained 38 items in three subsections.

Validity and Reliability

Reliability and validity are vital for scientific investigations. Face validity was done through seeking feedback from three experts in the field. After that, the questionnaire was translated into Arabic and was piloted to 19 students who had the same characteristics of the participants. The reliability was measured by Cronbach's alpha and the Reliability coefficient alpha value remained .834 that indicates high level of reliability.

Data Collection

After finalizing the procedural steps to establish validity and reliability of the instrument, the translated version of the final 38-item strongly-agree to strongly-disagree Likert-scale questionnaire was generalized to the participants of this study. The participants were requested to complete the survey during their teaching sessions. They were briefed about the purpose of the study as well as the ethical issues and they were given 15 minutes to complete it.

Data Analysis

The data were manually entered and descriptive statistics in terms of *means*, *standard deviations* and *percentages* of the responses of the participants of this study regarding the questionnaire items

were calculated using version 20 of SPSS. The data generated was tabulated to be analyzed and discussed in relation to the previous research in the field in the section of 'results and discussion'.

Results and Discussion

The data generated through the descriptive analyses of the perceptions of SEUU towards 38 items of various listening comprehension strategies have been presented in the tables given below.

Table 1. *Descriptive statistics for listening strategies*

No	Listening strategies	N	Min	Max	Mean	SD
1	Cognitive strategies	17	3.39	4.42	3.9108	.31037
2	Metacognitive strategies	15	3.41	4.37	3.8215	.27668
3	Socio-affective strategies	6	2.95	4.22	3.7161	.46732

Table 1 details the cumulative mean for the three kinds of listening comprehension strategies. The descriptive analysis informs that the participants of this study prefer to use cognitive strategies the most followed by metacognitive strategies. A high mean of 4.42 has been recorded for CLCS with SD of mere .31 indicating narrow inter-rater differences. Similarly mean value assigned to MLCS has been 4.37 with least SD of only .27. Socio-affective strategies were reported to be used the least by this group with a mean value of 3.71. Review of relevant literature also support the findings of this survey study. Abdalhamid (2012) investigated listening comprehension strategies used by advanced and intermediate Arab ESL learners and has revealed that both groups have exhibited highest preference for cognitive strategies. Metacognitive strategies have been ranked next to cognitive strategies whereas socio-affective strategies have been given the least preference. The findings are completely in line with the results of the study in hand. The findings of Kassem (2015) are confirm the results of this study. He has stated that Egyptian male and female sophomores have also exhibited the same pattern of using cognitive strategies the most followed by metacognitive and socio-affective strategies. The same findings have been reported by several other studies which have been conducted in the context of Iran (Mohseny & Raeisi, 2009; Nowrouzi, Tam, Nimehchisalem, and Zareian, 2014) as well as Western countries (Bacon, 1992; Vandergrift, 2003). This highest use of CLCS followed by MLCS might be because of the participants' preference for using inferencing techniques and background knowledge to compensate for their low English language proficiency of complexity of listening skills tasks.

Table 2. *Descriptive statistics for cognitive strategies*

No	Cognitive	N	Mean	SD
1	I put new words into a context to understand the meaning.	118	4.0085	.95627
2	I make guesses about the topic based on what has already been said.	118	3.7627	.93989
3	I listen for main ideas first and then details.	118	4.3814	.89557
4	I predict or make hypotheses on texts by titles.	118	3.6610	.97156
5	While listening, I piece things together from the details.	118	4.0169	.89617
6	While listening, I will notice the information questions with who, how, when, where and what in the content.	118	3.8898	1.06846

7	I use the tone of voice to guess the meaning of what I hear.	118	3.9153	.97469
8	I use body language to guess the meaning of what I hear.	118	3.7288	1.09123
9	I use material in the answer sheet (e.g. the printed items, choices and pictures) to guess the meaning of what I hear.	118	3.8559	1.03176
10	I practice sounds in the target language that are very different from sounds in my own language to become comfortable with them.	118	3.9068	.98699
11	I listen to the radio in the target language.	118	3.7373	1.08940
12	I watch English programs on TV.	118	4.2881	.89731
13	I prefer to talk to foreigners in English.	118	4.3644	1.00991
14	While listening, I make a written summary of the main points.	118	3.3898	1.02976
15	I make a mental summary of information presented in a listening task.	118	3.4322	1.08193
16	I take notes of main points and keywords.	118	3.7203	1.05316
17	I watch movies in the target language.	118	4.4237	1.01617

Descriptive analyses for CLCS indicate the participants' preference for these strategies as six items of this category have been assigned a higher mean value of 4 or above. Highest mean value has been recorded for item 17 indicating that the participants of this study prefer to watch English movies to acquaint themselves with native accent. This finding confirms the study of Nowrouzi, Tam, Nimehchisalem and Zareian (2014) who have stated that Iranian EFL learners also use this strategy most frequently to get themselves ready to perform better in listening tasks. The second highest value has been recorded for item 3 stating that SEUU as represented by the participants of this study prefer to listen for main ideas first and then for the details. Items 13 and 12 have been ranked 3rd and 4th highest preferences respectively for CLCS which are also related to talking to foreigners in the target language and watching English programmes on TV. The results seem to suggest that the participants have exhibited a trend of exposing them to the target language as much as possible to tune their ears for enhanced listening comprehension. This also confirms the study of Nowrouzi, Tam, Nimehchisalem, and Zareian (2014). The participants' preference of exposing themselves to native accent by watching movies and talking to foreigners in the target language seems to compensate for their limited exposure to English in general and listening skills in particular not only in the society but also on campus. This lack of exposure to the target language has been highlighted by Liu (2002, p. 146) who posited that "limited exposure to varieties of spoken English" is a major factor influencing learners' overall listening difficulties. Two other items (5th and 1st) have been assigned high mean value of more than 4 as well.

The remaining twelve items have been ranked medium values ranging from 3.389 to 3.915. The least mean values have been reported for items 14 and 15 which are related to making a written and mental summary for the information presented in the listening texts. This trend aligns with the findings of Javid, Farooq and Khan (2012) who have informed that Saudi EFL learners do not prefer writing tasks. The result is also in line with the findings of Nowrouzi, Tam, Nimehchisalem, and Zareian (2014) who has also revealed that Iranian EFL learners use these strategies least during their listening tasks. Third least mean was recorded for item 4 which is related to making

predictions based on the text titles. Item 16 has been put fourth on the ranking of lowest mean highlighting the participants' least preference for taking notes of main ideas and keywords to help them increase listening comprehension.

Table 3. *Descriptive statistics for metacognitive strategies*

No	Metacognitive strategies	N	Mean	SD
18	I have a plan in my mind before listening.	118	3.5000	1.00213
19	I prepare for talks and performances I will hear in the target language by reading some background materials beforehand.	118	3.4831	.99342
20	I decide to focus on the topic and ignore the distracters such as people and things around me.	118	3.9407	.98962
21	I try to listen for specific details to see whether I can understand them.	118	4.0847	.87292
22	I listen for key words.	118	4.3729	.84526
23	I try to understand what I hear without translating it word-for-word.	118	3.9322	1.05189
24	I use my experience and knowledge to help me understand.	118	4.2119	.91382
25	I try to keep up with the speed.	118	3.7627	.94894
26	I try to compare the developing interpretation with my knowledge of the topic.	118	3.7119	.97929
27	I quickly adjust interpretation during listening if I realize that it is not correct.	118	3.4068	.88903
28	I Think back to everything heard to verify the meaningfulness of guessed words.	118	3.9915	1.00847
29	As I listen, I sometimes ask myself if I am satisfied with my comprehension.	118	3.7966	1.09043
30	After listening, I think back to how I listened and about what I might do differently next time.	118	3.8559	1.03176
31	After listening, I think back to the quality of my strategy use (for example planning, inferencing) and about how I can do better next time.	118	3.7203	1.03681
32	I prepare a list of my problems and try to solve them before my next Listening.	118	3.5508	1.24446

This section contains 15 items to elicit the respondents' perceptions related to MLCS and comparatively low mean values have been recorded for this category as compared to CLCS. Only 3 items have been assigned high mean of more than 4. The highest preference has been shown for listening to key words followed by item 24 stating that SEUU tend to use their experience and knowledge to help them comprehend the listening texts better. This finding confirms the results reported in CLCS of the present study as 3 highest ranking items were related to their tendency to

watch English movies, English programmes and talking to foreigners. This finding contradicts with the results of Nowrouzi, Tam, Nimehchisalem, and Zareian (2014) who have reported that both these items were assigned medium ranking by Iranian EFL learners. The next 2 highest ranked items have been 21 and 28 which exhibited that the participants have high tendency to concentrate on specific details and overall listening texts to help increase their comprehension. The participants' preference for using 'listening for specific details' is in line with the study of Osada (2001) who reported that EFL learners with low English language proficiency tend to use bottom-up strategies mainly concentrating on the information given in the listening texts and are unable to activate their top-down strategies to comprehend the listening content. This seems to suggest that learners' target language proficiency is an important indicator in their selection of various listening comprehension strategies. The study of Nowrouzi, Tam, Nimehchisalem, and Zareian (2014) has also supported this result as it has also indicating a reasonably high preference for using metacognitive strategy of listening for specific details in listening texts.

As far the least preferred items are concerned, 'adjusting interpretations' have been indicated as least preferred strategy. The next least preferred items have been 19 and 18 respectively stating that SEUU don't do any preparation by reading relevant material or planning the listening task prior to actual listening. The results have also reported that SEUU do not usually list their problematic areas to help them improve their listening comprehension in the next listening task. The remaining items have received medium liking from the participants.

Table 4. *Descriptive statistics for socio-affective strategies*

No	Socio-effective strategies	N	Mean	SD
33	I ask others for feedback on how to solve my listening problems.	118	3.3983	1.32781
34	I attend out-of-class events like conferences where the new language is spoken.	118	2.9492	1.21140
35	I imitate the way native speakers talk.	118	3.9915	.99996
36	I encourage myself to listen more even when I am afraid of problems in understanding.	118	3.9831	1.05396
37	I give myself a reward or treat when I improve in listening.	118	3.7542	1.21905
38	I hope teachers can teach me more skills to improve my listening comprehension.	118	4.2203	1.12573

Table 5 contains data for 6 items related to SLCS and the data generated through descriptive analysis has reported that the only item with mean value of higher than 4 expects the teachers to teach them more skills to improve their listening comprehension. This trend confirms the previous research conducted in the same academic context which indicated that Saudi EFL learners prefer their teachers to help them in all academic matters (Javid, 2014). The second highest preference has been reported for SLCS of imitating the way native speakers talk. The participants have exhibited nearly the same preference for keeping on listening even when they have problems in comprehending the text. This finding contradicts with Nowrouzi, Tam, Nimehchisalem, and

Zareian (2014) who stated that Iranian EFL learners have assigned quite low values to these two items. The least preferred items included attending out-of-class events, seeking feedback from others and rewarding themselves after achieving some improvement in listening comprehension. The descriptive analyses for this subcategory have informed medium to low preferences for all items except the last one. This situation seems to be caused by a lack of social opportunities for listening practice in the EFL context of Saudi Arabia. Review of relevant research seem to offer valuable insights into the fact that listening input is extremely low in various EFL contexts which is usually limited to the teacher talk at academic institutions (Nowrouzi, Tam, Nimehchisalem, & Zareian, 2014).

Conclusion and recommendations

The results of this empirical study reveal that Saudi EFL learners represented by the participants of this survey prefer to use cognitive strategies the most followed by metacognitive and socio-affective strategies respectively. This trend offers valuable insights into the fact that Saudi EFL learners resort to bottom-up strategies more frequently as compared to the top-down ones. The lowest preference for socio-affective strategies entails that in listening skills courses these strategies should be emphasized more especially the ones which train EFL learners to avoid the affective problems including low self-esteem, nervousness, anxiety, low motivation, embarrassment etc. which hinder listeners' affective performance (Cross, 2011; Gebra, 2015). It has been reported that listening comprehension is a difficult skill as it includes complex processing of listeners' background knowledge and linguistic skills in addition to its feature of uncontrollable speed of delivery (Gonen, 2009). Therefore, it is recommended that Saudi EFL learners should be made aware of the significance of these strategies to enhance their listening comprehension. English language teachers should provide their students with appropriate skills of how to listen, retrospect on listening process and concentrate on practicing metacognitive and socio-affective strategies during their listening tasks. It also seems important that teachers should enhance their students' top-down cognitive processing skills during their listening skills classes. It will also be instrumental in improving listening comprehension of Saudi EFL learners if the teachers highlight the background about the listening contents thus helping their students to activate content schemata enabling them to connect the listening content with their personal experiences. It is highly recommended that teachers should provide their students with this confidence and courage to talk about their listening problems as well as the strategies they have used to tackle those problems. A candid discussion and sharing of their successes and failures in this regard will also help Saudi EFL learners choose appropriate and suitable strategies. It also seems important that teachers should encourage their students to share their feedback with their class mates to help minimize these problems and enhance possibilities of improved listening comprehension.

About the Author:

The author is a linguist, a researcher in second Language Acquisition, founder and ex-director of the scholarship department at Taif University. Currently he is the Dean of University Development Deanship and assistant professor of Linguistics. His research interests include SLA, syntax, linguistics skills associated with formal education and also naturalistic acquisition.

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