

# Strategies to Support the Enhancement of Listening Comprehension (A Case of Ishik University English Preparatory School)

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## Abstract

Teaching listening while dealing with a foreign language has largely been neglected, as, on the one hand, it has been expected that L1 listening strategies would be automatically transferred on L2 and, on the other hand, as listening skills are sophisticated, hence, difficult to investigate and teach. However, as the skill which is prerequisite for two-sided oral communication and as a valuable source of comprehensible input, listening deserves much more attention than has got until today, either in teaching practice or in research. This study attempts to show the influence of developing learners' listening strategies on the improvement of their comprehension skills. In an experimental study with 40 students at Ishik University (Iraq) it was found that the use of strategies in the listening process considerably enhanced the achievement of learners.

**Keywords:** Listening activities, listening comprehension, listening strategies

## Introduction

Historically, while teaching EFL (English as a Foreign Language), listening has been underestimated – insufficient time has been spent on it in and out of class, also, little research was dedicated to the development of listening skills, due to the complexity of the skill. However, if, while teaching English as a Second Language (ESL), the lack of time spent on listening comprehension in class has been compensated by the time spent on it in the native-language environment, no such compensation could be offered in EFL. The idea that L1 listening strategies will be automatically transferred on L2 also found little evidence (Rubin, 1975). Thus, it is obvious that teaching foreign language listening skills needs more attention both theoretically and practically, as listening comprehension has a vital role in successful communication. If listening comprehension does not occur, communication cannot be established. In other words, learners need to receive input to communicate - the term "comprehensible input" was introduced by Stephen Krashen (1982) to stand for the language heard and read which the learner can understand.

Listening is not a passive activity. It is a process in which learners need to understand the structure and the vocabulary of the target language, and at the same time, through interpreting the intonation and stress, learners need to discriminate between the sounds and finally to interpret the whole utterance. Listening is a difficult activity and it requires hard work. Learners need to analyze all language compo-

nents carefully, applying their knowledge of the subject spoken about, in order to obtain information.

Listening is processing input, so learners are required to recognize language knowledge (Krashen, 1982). If learners do not have sufficient language knowledge, they cannot process input and comprehension does not occur. Vandergrift (1999) argues that asking learners to produce without input processing does not bring about outcomes (i.e., speech production: speaking and writing). Initially learners need to have sufficient language knowledge and assimilate it in long term-memory. This will allow them to comprehend better. Yet, short-term memory may be unable to retain all the information perceived. So, learners need to improve their auditory memory for better listening comprehension. Besides, background knowledge (if it exists) helps comprehension, so, unless refreshed (or, if needed, provided), it will also create obstacles to listening comprehension. Thus, in order to receive messages, learners need to possess and be able to apply cognitive strategies to overcome the difficulties in listening comprehension. Having such strategies is a great advantage, which enables learners to learn the target language in an effective way.

The term 'strategies' means "techniques or devices which a learner may use to acquire knowledge". It was first introduced to language teaching and learning by Rubin (1975, p. 43). Oxford (1990) aimed to involve steps used by

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learners to make the acquisition easier, which are memory strategies (how learners remember language), cognitive strategies (how learners think about their learning), compensation strategies (allow learners to compensate limited knowledge), metacognitive strategies (how learners manage their own learning), affective strategies (learners' feelings) and social strategies (learners interact with others). Anderson (2005, p. 757) develops the term further and defines it as "conscious actions that learners take to improve their language learning". Anderson (2003) argues that these strategies could be observed, for instance, when a learner is taking notes during a lecture or they could be unobservable, i.e. mental, for instance, thinking about what the learner knows about a topic prior to reading a text in a resource. These strategies of listening comprehension are considered as steps, which are taken by learners to receive information and deduce meaning from the oral input, through taking their prior knowledge of the world and of the target language into account (Young, 1997). The enhancement of effective strategies is significant for listening comprehension, because strategies lead learners to value their own understanding (Vandergrift, 1999).

## 1. Literature Review

Listening strategies are classified into two main categories: bottom-up and top-down. Bottom-up processing refers to the "part of the process in which the understanding of incoming language is worked out proceeding from sounds into words into grammatical relationship and lexical meaning and so on" (Morley, 1991, p. 87). Top-down strategy, on the other hand, is "the converse of bottom-up: holistic, going from whole to part and focuses on interpretation of meaning rather than recognition of sounds, words and sentences" (Lynch & Mendelsohn, 2002, p. 197). The information processing has been brought up from the listener's prior knowledge of the situation or context and language expectations. The prior knowledge of the listener plays a major role in the process of digesting information. This strategy is composed of: listening for the main idea, predicting, drawing inferences and summarizing (Morley, 1991, p. 87; Guo & Wills, 2004, p.4).

Listening provides the learners with aural input they need for language acquisition and allows learners to communicate interactively. Effective language teachers have the skills to help their learners increase their listening comprehension, so that learners can develop listening strategies. Sharma (2011, p.13) states that listener-based strategies require the following:

- Listening for the major idea of the material
- Predicting the cases or incidents in the material
- Drawing assumptions
- Cutting

Furthermore, the language difficulty level of the material influences input processing. Words, grammar and pronunciation in a listening material are key factors for the establishment of comprehension. These materials must match the student's listening skills' level. Too difficult listening texts will give learners nothing in terms of listening skills development, taking into consideration Vygotsky's 'zone of proximate development' (1989). According to Sharma (2011, p.14), text-

based strategies require: listening for specific information, recognizing cognates, and recognizing word-order patterns.

To process meaning from a listening material, learners need to follow the following basic steps:

- They need to know the purpose for listening; this will encourage learners to motivate themselves better;
- They need to have some background knowledge about the topic; this will allow them to make predictions about the content, and learners will be able to select more useful listening strategies, if they have some prior knowledge of the topic;
- Learners need to select relevant to the difficulty level of the listening text top-down and/or bottom-up strategies and use them effectively; using both strategies simultaneously is especially effective;
- Learners need to check their answers after the listening activity finishes; this helps them to see their comprehension failures and specify the choice of different listening strategies.

In order to receive better results in listening activities, learners need to apply the following strategies:

- a) Before listening:
  - Define the purpose of listening;
  - Refresh / check background information about the topic they will listen to;
  - Brainstorm the language on the topic;
  - Predict the information based on the title and some illustrations.
- b) During listening:
  - Check the guesses;
  - Select the major information (keywords, names, other data);
  - Ask for help if comprehension of listening materials does not occur.
- c) After listening:
  - Assess the comprehension of the given piece;
  - Evaluate the overall progress of listening comprehension;
  - Decide whether the strategies applied were appropriate or not;
  - Modify strategies if it is needed.

When teachers use pre-listening, while-listening and post-listening activities in listening comprehension, learners can learn better. At pre-listening stage learners will have an idea about the topic, which will facilitate their comprehension of the listening activity. Both pre-listening and post-listening activities are important in that they reinforce the understanding of the activities. Vandergrift (1999) argues that these

strategies guide learners for successful comprehension of listening materials and learners can develop metacognitive strategies acquisition in three ways: planning, monitoring and evaluating.

In foreign language learning, various strategies are used to reinforce learner achievement. Wenden (1987) argues that learners need to know about the strategies and they need to design their learning accordingly, because these strategies may affect their second language learning. Strategies will help learners to guide their learning. Rubin (1987) classified strategies into three groups: learning, communication and social strategies.

Learning strategies contribute to the learners' language awareness. Learners develop these strategies to promote learning, so learning strategies influence the quality of learning. Communication strategies and social strategies are not directly related to language learning.

O'Malley and Chamot (1990) classified learner strategies into three groups which are: cognitive, metacognitive and social/ affective ones. Cognitive strategy includes mental manipulation or transformation of language materials, and the purpose is to promote understanding, which will lead to acquisition (O'Malley & Chamot, 1990). Metacognitive strategy, on the other hand, includes knowledge about the learning process. It is a strategy that requires learners to think about the learning process. Learners through this strategy plan their learning; furthermore, learners self-evaluate their learning in this process after the completion of the task. Social/affective strategies include working cooperatively, and question asking.

Metacognitive and cognitive strategies are important to improve the process of learning. O'Malley and Chamot (1990) argue that learners who do not have metacognitive approaches, do not have the ability to monitor their progress. These learners cannot direct their learning; as a result they cannot evaluate their accomplishments. One of metacognitive strategies - deductive strategy - refers to application of rules to language comprehension. Learners use deduction in this strategy through applying discourse, sociocultural and structural rules.

Based on the above, the following model of strategies of EFL listening can be suggested: Figure 1.

Wenden (1998) claims that learners gain the following advantages through metacognitive strategies:

1. Learners have the ability to use learning strategies;
2. Learners learn faster and integrate the knowledge in a better way;
3. Learners consider themselves as continuous receivers and they can appropriately deal with all circumstances;
4. Learners are self-confident to ask for help;
5. Learners investigate and assess why they are attentive learners;
6. Learners can deal with the issue if something goes wrong during the task;
7. Learners' strategies are compatible with the learning task and they can make adaptations for changing conditions.

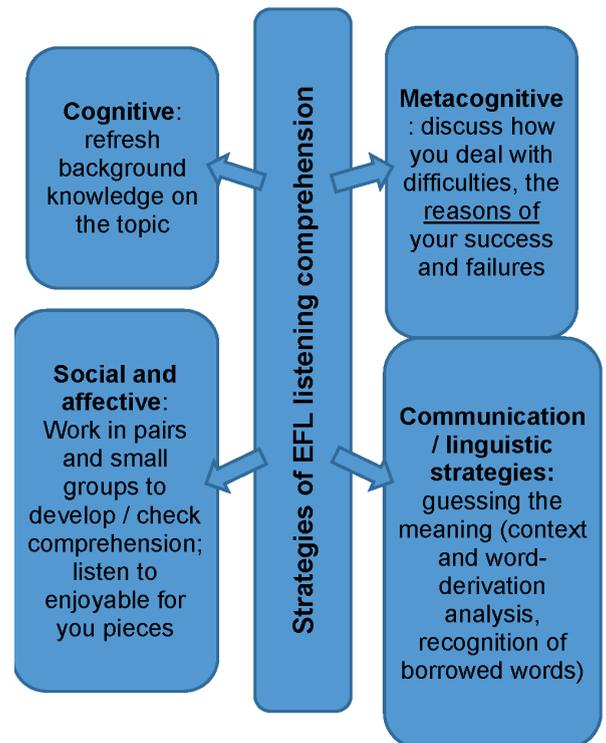


Figure 1. Strategies of EFL listening comprehension.

The impact of listening strategies has been investigated by researchers. In a study carried out by Rubin (1988, p. 32), for example, it was found that the use of listening strategies can produce better results. Rubin stated that "the combination of well-selected video and the acquisition of effective learning strategies can improve student affect and motivation". If learning strategies are carefully selected and implemented, they can help learners to gain better learning outcomes. In another study by Thompson and Rubin (1996) the influence of cognitive and metacognitive strategies has been studied. While the experimental group in their study had a systematic instruction in strategies for listening comprehension, the learners in the control group had no such instruction, they just fulfilled the required tasks. The tests that learners fulfilled before, during and after the study, showed that learners who received strategy instruction, demonstrated a much higher level of listening proficiency than other learners without a special instruction for strategy development.

Thus, the advantages of teaching the strategies of listening comprehension are:

1. Developing higher level cognitive skills;
2. Making the listening process easier;
3. Increasing students' motivation and self-confidence;
4. Improving the comprehension skills.

However, it is necessary to mention the disadvantages, as well:

1. Mastering the strategies takes time, which, eventually, decreases the listening practice time.

2. For some students dealing with strategies is intellectually difficult, so not all of them really benefit.

## 2. Research Methodology

### 2.1. Environment

Ishik University has been providing education in Iraq for 8 years. One of the reasons why the university has become one of the most favored higher education institutions in Iraq is teaching all courses in English. The author of the article teaches listening in preparatory school and he has seen that even students with good enough vocabulary and grammar skills have grave problems while listening. He has tried to use strategies very often in his classes to facilitate the comprehension of language materials and has seen that the use of strategies enabled students to understand the listening materials more easily. This stimulated the researcher to study the issue of listening strategies application more thoroughly.

### 2.2. Design of the study

Quantitative methods were used in the study. The performance of learners was carefully assessed by testing. The listening comprehension tests that the learners had involved conversations between university students about campus life. The listening tests included 5 conversations each of which had 10 multiple choice questions. Comparison between the control and the experimental group results was carried out.

### 2.3. Sample Selection

The participants of this study were Ishik University preparatory school students. The university administration gave the researcher the permission to hold an experiment at the university. The students were informed about the experiment, and the researcher obtained their informed consent to participate in the research. They were promised confidentiality and anonymity so that nobody's results would be publicly disclosed – nobody would know exactly which student got which grades.

Two groups were created: experimental and control group. Each group involved 20 learners, so totally 40 students participated in this study. There were 100 pre-intermediate level students at the university prep school, and 40 of them (upon their consent) were selected randomly and also randomly placed to the two groups. The language level of learners in the groups did not differ largely, which contributed to trustworthy findings.

### 2.4. Procedure

Both groups were taught the same language material with the same textbooks. The number of hours dedicated to the development of listening skills did not differ, either, which contributed to the reliability of the comparison of the groups' results. However, the students in the control group were just practicing the listening comprehension tasks offered by the textbook, while the students in the experimental group were purposefully developing their listening strategies according to the model suggested above. They were activating their prior knowledge of the world and target language before fulfilling the listening tasks. . Pre-listening, while-listening and

post-listening activities were used for this. Students were fulfilling special activities (such as "repeat what you hear" – each next sentence based on the previous one, but longer) that helped them to improve their auditory memory. The teacher explained to them about the use of bottom-up and top-down processing, which enabled the learners to predict what they would hear and anticipate what would occur next. This approach left less time to just practicing listening, so some activities offered by the textbook had to be omitted. However, learners became more successful in comprehending the texts when strategies were applied, so the fulfilment of fewer exercises was compensated by a more effective, conscious approach during the practice.

### 2.5. Data Collection

Data were collected in this study through weekly tests in both groups. The difficulty level of the tests in both groups and throughout the experiment was the same (provided by piloting the test items). Learners in both groups had the same listening material and questions in the examinations in each week. To provide the reliability and the validity of the results, in experimental and control groups the same book (Brooks, 2011), the same listening materials, the same number of hours dedicated to teaching listening were used.

### 2.6. Results

The obtained weekly results in each group, student by student, are shown in detail in the appendix (tables 4-5). Table 1 below shows their summary.

Table 1. Mobile Electronic Devices

	Week 1	Week 2	Week 3	Week 4
Control group	54.7	56.4	59.1	61.6
Experimental groups	62.4	69.2	75.8	79.6

While the averages of learners' in the control group are respectively 54.7, 56.4, 59.1, 61.6 (or grew by 6.9 points = 13%, which is the result of time spent on practicing listening), the averages of learners' in the experimental group are respectively 62.4, 69.2, 75.8, 79.6 (or grew by 17.2 points = 28%). These scores yield that strategies during listening process help learners understand the listening materials better.

It is seen that both groups improved in terms of listening comprehension weekly. However, it is clearly seen that the use of strategies contributed to the achievement of learners; pre-listening, while-listening and post-listening activities helped learners with better comprehension of listening materials. The weekly scores of students in the experimental group were increasing more steadily than those in the control group.

Table 2 below shows the means of weekly test scores, standard deviations and standard error means.

**Table 2.** Paired Samples Statistics

		Mean	N	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Pair 1	Week_1_Cont rol	54.700	20	5.3617	1.1989
	Week_2_Cont rol	56.400	20	5.5289	1.2363
Pair 2	Week_2_Cont rol	56.400	20	5.5289	1.2363
	Week_3_Cont rol	59.1000	20	6.30706	1.41030
Pair 3	Week_3_Cont rol	59.1000	20	6.30706	1.41030
	Week_4_Cont rol	61.5500	20	6.44389	1.44090
Pair 4	Week_1_Expe riment	62.3500	20	2.99605	.66994
	Week_2_Expe riment	69.2500	20	4.50584	1.00754
Pair 5	Week_2_Expe riment	69.2500	20	4.50584	1.00754
	Week_3_Expe riment	75.8000	20	5.34691	1.19561
Pair 6	Week_3_Expe riment	75.8000	20	5.34691	1.19561
	Week_4_Expe riment	79.6000	20	5.95067	1.33061

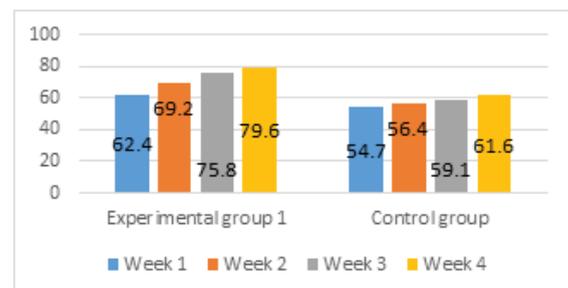
Based on the above results, paired samples test was carried out (see table 3), to find out the confidence level of the obtained results.

Table 3 shows that there is strong evidence ( $p = 0.000$ ) that the use of strategies improve listening comprehension. If we look at the 95% Confidence Interval (95% CI) which means that if we were to do this experiment 100 times, 95 times the true value for the difference would lie in the 95% confidence interval. In this study, the 95% CI is from -2 to -1 for pair 1, -3 to -1 for pair 2, -3 to -2 for pair 3 etc. These numbers confirm that the difference in marks is actually very small which means that the results are valid.

## 2.7. Data Analysis

Figure 1 shows the achievement of learners in both groups throughout the study. The weekly averages of learners in both groups are demonstrated in Figure 1. While the averages of learners in the control group are respectively 54.7, 56.4, 59.1, 61.6, the averages of learners' in the experimental group are respectively 62.4, 69.2, 75.8, and 79.6. These scores yield that the development of listening strategies during listening process effectively helped the experimental group students to understand the listening materials better.

Quite a sharp increase in the experimental group is seen between the first and the second week (by 6.8 points, or 11%), then the increase gradually slows down, but still goes on (week 2 – week 3: by 6.6 points, or 10%; week 3-week 4: 3.8 points or 5%). It is visible that the dramatic increase is achieved when the strategies are first explained and used (second and third week), later the increase in the skills level goes on, but is not so dramatic.



**Figure 2.** The achievement of learners in both groups in all weeks

On the other hand, we can see that the increase in the control group is slower than in the experimental group (between week 1 and 2: 1.7 points or 3%, between week 2 and 3: 2.7 points or 5%, between week 3 and 4 by 2.5 points or 4%).

Thus, the experimental group's results grew considerably within a one-month period - by 17.2 points = 28%), while the control group's result grew reasonably within the same period (by 6.9 points = 13%). This supports the idea that purposefully teaching listening strategies increases the level of listening skills.

As the research was limited by the country, university, student number and duration, more research is necessary, to come to the conclusion that the suggested model of developing listening strategies yields a considerable increase of the level of listening comprehension skills.

Table 3. Paired Samples Test

		Paired Differences				t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	
		Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference				
					Lower				Upper
Pair 1	Week_1_Control - Week_2_Control	-1.7000	.9787	.2188	-2.1581	-1.2419	-7.768	19	.000
Pair 2	Week_2_Control - Week_3_Control	-2.70000	1.75019	.39135	-3.51911	-1.88089	-6.899	19	.000
Pair 3	Week_3_Control - Week_4_Control	-2.45000	1.46808	.32827	-3.13708	-1.76292	-7.463	19	.000
Pair 4	Week_1_Experimnt Week_2_Experimnt	-6.90000	1.94395	.43468	-7.80980	-5.99020	-15.874	19	.000
Pair 5	Week_2_Experimnt Week_3_Experimnt	-6.55000	2.08945	.46721	-7.52789	-5.57211	-14.019	19	.000
Pair 6	Week_3_Experimnt Week_4_Experimnt	-3.80000	1.19649	.26754	-4.35997	-3.24003	-14.203	19	.000

## Conclusion

Based on the literature analysis, it can be summed up that listening is an essential part of verbal communication. It provides learners with comprehensible input. However, EFL do get less experience in listening comprehension, compared not only to L1 students, but also to ESL students. This means that teachers need to increase the efficiency of teaching EFL listening in order to turn students into successful listeners. The use of listening strategies in foreign language learning process influence input processing. Unless learners are provided the key factors for the establishment of comprehension, they do not gain enough benefits from listening practice. The implementation of listening strategies will generate better learning outcomes.

The strategies of EFL listening comprehension, according to the suggested in the research model, included all four main components:

1. Cognitive – refreshing the background knowledge on the topic

2. Meta-cognitive – discussing the ways to tackle with difficulties, the reasons of success and failures, such as meaning elicitation from more knowledgeable others or interlocutors

Communication / linguistic – methods of guessing the meaning, including using the linguistic context, word-derivation, cognate words

Social / affective - working in pairs and small groups to develop / check comprehension; listening to enjoyable pieces

The results of the experiment held at the prep school of Ishik University (Iraq) showed that the experimental group's results grew considerably within a one-month period of teaching listening strategies - by 17.2 points or by 28%, while the control group's result grew reasonably within the same period (by 6.9 points = 13%), as no teaching of listening strategies was provided. This means that the teaching and the application of listening strategies in the experiment has significantly increased the level of students' scores in listening. As the experiment held is aligned with the literature analyzed, it is expected that the application of the offered model would increase the level of listening comprehension of other students as well. To say that for sure, more experimentation on a wider scale is needed.

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**Appendix A****Table 4.** Test Scores of students in the control group

Learner	Week 1	Week 2	Week 3	Week 4
Student 1	62	64	70	71
Student 2	62	64	68	69
Student 3	60	62	68	75
Student 4	60	62	66	67
Student 5	60	62	64	67
Student 6	60	60	64	65
Student 7	58	60	62	65
Student 8	58	58	62	63
Student 9	56	58	60	63
Student 10	56	58	60	63
Student 11	56	58	58	60
Student 12	54	56	58	61
Student 13	52	56	56	60
Student 14	52	54	56	57
Student 15	50	52	54	57
Student 16	50	52	52	55
Student 17	48	50	52	55
Student 18	48	48	52	54
Student 19	46	48	50	53
Student 20	46	46	50	51
Average	54.7	56.4	59.1	61.6

**Table 5.** Test scores of students in the experimental group

Learner	Week 1	Week 2	Week 3	Week 4
Student 1	66	74	86	91
Student 2	66	74	84	89
Student 3	67	75	82	87
Student 4	67	74	82	85
Student 5	66	74	80	85
Student 6	64	72	80	83
Student 7	64	72	78	83
Student 8	62	72	78	81
Student 9	63	72	76	81
Student 10	63	72	76	79
Student 11	62	71	74	79
Student 12	62	67	74	77
Student 13	61	68	74	77
Student 14	61	67	74	77
Student 15	60	66	72	75
Student 16	59	64	70	75
Student 17	59	63	70	75
Student 18	58	62	70	73
Student 19	59	62	68	71
Student 20	58	64	68	69
Average	62.4	69.2	75.8	79.6