Promoting Metacognitive Strategies to Listening Class

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Abstract

Listening skill is often ignored. David Nunan (1997) commented that listening is the "Cinderella Skill" which is overlooked by its elder sister "speaking" in SL learning. Speaking and writing skill has become the standard of the knowledge of second language, listening and reading have been turned to be the secondary ones.

On the other hand, listening is vital in the language classroom because it provides input for the learner. In fact, most English listening teachers focus on testing learners listening skill rather than on developing the learners' listening skill. This practice tends to make them anxious and tends to become ineffective listeners. This condition brings about the learners' difficulties in comprehending listening materials. Good English teachers should minimize such a condition.

This article attempts to find ways of creating good atmosphere for listening class. What should we "as teachers' do to respond the problem? Metacognitive is theory of awareness of what and how to learn. Based on my experience in teaching listening, metacognitive strategies are very valuable for learners to learn listening.

Finally, I encourage listening class teachers to promote the strategies to their students. To promote the strategies a teacher should do several steps with the class; discussing learners' problems, talking the nature of listening, building students' awareness about the important of learning strategies, training the students about metacognitive strategies, and doing reflection.

Keywords: Listening, Strategy, Metacognition

Introduction

In a language course, teaching listening skills is one of the most difficult tasks for any ESL/EFL teacher. This is because successful listening skills are acquired over time and with lots of practice. Listening is often frustrating for both of teachers and students. It is because there are no rules in teaching linstening like in grammar teaching (Beare, Keneth in http://esl.about.com/)

In a series of experiments Anderson and Lynch (1988) in Nunan (1991;24) found out that the difficulty of listening tasks was particularly influenced by: (1) The organization of information (texts containing the information matched their chronological sequence in real life were easier than texts in which the information was presented out of sequence), (2) the familiar topic, (3) the explicit and sufficient the information, (4) the type of referring expression used (for example, the use of pronouns rather than complete noun phrase referents made texts more difficult), (5) whether the text described 'static' relationships (for example, geometric figures or dynamic relationship (for example, a road accident).

Moreover, the difficulties in listening become more serious because of the teachers' paradigm. Miller (2000:25) in Qing (2001) said that many teachers believe in the concept: "practice makes perfect". They require students to do various kinds of exercises in each class. Students are in a passive situation and often feel tired and bored, and too often, teachers only use listening activities to "test listening skills, rather than develop good listening skills", which leads to anxiety and apprehension.

Metacognition is defined as "knowledge and beliefs about thinking and the factors affecting thinking" which regulate "the articulation of strategy and knowledge" (Pressley, 1998), it is the primary enabling state for students to be able to work independently and flexibly. The high level of awareness that characterises metacognition is associated with a desire for self knowledge, whereas low self consciousness breeds intellectual defensiveness. Metacognition is often associated with stable psychological states such as IQ. However, rather than being developmentally fixed, research is showing that the acquisition of metacognition may be subject to instructional intervention (Boekaerts, 1997) in (Luca, Joe and McMahon, Mark, 2004)

Based on my experience in teaching listening, metacognitive strategies are very valuable for learners to learn listening. Hence, I encourage listening class teachers to promote the strategies to their students. The question then becomes one of how to promote it.

What Is Listening?

Listening teachers should know what listening is. Listening is a skill that is not just hearing and perceiving sound in a passive way, but listening occupies an active process. This correlation is similar to seeing and reading. Seeing is a very ordinary and passive state while reading is a focused process requiring readers' instrumental approach.

So, what 'listening' really means is 'listening and understanding what we hear at the same time'. So, two concurrent actions are demanded to take place in this process. (Saha and Talukdar, 2008)

Furthermore, there is a traditional labelling for reading and listening as "passive" skills. But linguists believe that a listener is involved in guessing, anticipating, checking, interpreting, interacting and organizing materials by associating and accommodating them to their prior knowledge of meaning and form.

Even as a receptive skill, the listening skill differs greatly from reading as reading materials are printed and permanent texts where the learners are required to interact with the sentences used with the help the knowledge previously owned while listening involves continuous material presentation where listeners have to respond the immediate expressions. From the view point of "product" or "process", listening is more a process than a product which instantly shapes the understanding and utterances of the learners.

Listening process

Richards (1990) in Moran (2005) provides a clear description of how listening comprehension is achieved by native or non-native listeners. He refers to this listening process as bottom-up and top-down process. Bottom-up process refers to the decoding process, the direct decoding of language into meaningful units, from sound waves through the air, through our ears and into our brain where the meaning is decoded. To decode sounds students need to know the code. The code consists of how the sounds work and how they string together and how the code can change in different ways when they are strung together.

Vandergrift (2002) mentioned two distinct processes involved in listening comprehension. Listeners use 'top-down' processes when they use prior knowledge to understand the meaning of a message. Prior knowledge can be knowledge of the topic, the listening context, the text-type, the culture or other information stored in long-term memory as schemata (typical sequences or common situations around which world knowledge is organized). Listeners use content words and contextual clues to form hypotheses in an exploratory fashion.

On the other hand, listeners also use 'bottom-up' processes when they use linguistic knowledge to understand the meaning of a message. They build meaning from lower level sounds to words to grammatical relationships to lexical meanings in order to arrive at the final message. Listening comprehension is neither top-down nor bottom-up process, but an interactive, interpretive process where listeners use both prior knowledge and linguistic knowledge in understanding messages. The degree to which listeners use the one process or the other depend on their knowledge of the language, their familiarity with the topic or the purpose for listening. For example, listening for gist involves primarily top-down processing, whereas listening for specific information, as in a weather broadcast, involves primarily bottom-up processing to comprehend all the desired details.

Metacognition

The term "metacognition" is from Greek *meta* means beside or beyond + English *cognition*. (http://www.encyclopedia.com).

Metacognition is a term that was coined by Flavell in 1970 and there has been much debate over a suitable definition. In a language learning context, this means knowing about oneself as a learner, in other words, the knowledge and self-awareness a learner has his own language learning process, and is regarded as the key to successful language learning. (http://www.pt.britishcouncil.org/journal/j1004ge.htm)

Most definitions of metacognition include both knowledge and strategy components. Knowledge is considered to be metacognitive if it is actively used in a strategic manner to ensure that a goal is met. Metacognition is often referred to as "thinking about thinking" and can be used to help students "learn how to learn."

Cognitive strategies are used to help achieve a particular goal while metacognitive strategies are used to ensure that the goal has been reached. (http://members.-iinet.net.au/~rstack1/world/rss/files/metacognition.htm)

Principles of Metacognitive Instruction

Research within and beyond L2 listening has consistently shown that even though metacognitive development can occur naturally through implicit socialization with experts, it can be enhanced through explicit intervention and scaffolded learning experiences in the classroom (Veenman *et al. 2006*). The proposed metacognitive instruction framework comprises two key components of metacognition: metacognitive knowledge and metacognitive strategies.

Metacognitive Knowledge

There are three dimensions of metacognitive knowledge (Flavell 1979) in Goh, Christine. (2008). Each dimension addresses a specific area of declarative knowledge that L2 listeners should develop:

a. *Person knowledge*: the way individuals learn to listen and the factors that influence one's own listening.
b. *Task knowledge*: the nature and the demands of listening tasks.

c. *Strategy knowledge*: effective ways to learn or to accomplish a listening task.

Metacognitive strategies

The categorizations of strategies by A.L. Brown (1978) in Goh, Christine (2008) have been applied successfully in L2 research and are useful considerations for developing greater self-regulation during listening and for general listening development:

a. *Planning*: determining comprehension or learning objectives and deciding the means by which the objectives can be achieved.
b. *Monitoring:* checking the process of unfolding comprehension or overall listening development plans.
c. *Evaluating:* determining the success of one's efforts at processing spoken input or the outcome of a plan for improving one's listening abilities.

It is quoted from *Strategic Teaching and Reading Project Guidebook* combined with the pedagogical sequence to develop an awareness of the process of listening and help students acquire the metacognitive knowledge critical to success in listening comprehension.. (1995, NCREL, rev. ed.) (Vandegrift, 1999) as follows.

Firstly, The process of before/ pre listening*.* Here the students plan for the successful completion of a listening task. Pre-listening activities help students make decisions about what to listen for and, subsequently, to focus attention on meaning while listening. When students are *developing* the plan of action, they should ask themselves: *"What in my prior knowledge will help me with this particular task? In what direction do I want my thinking to take me? What should I do first? Why am I listening to this selection? How much time do I have to complete the task?"*

The most important thing in the pre-listening stage is to teach students to "plan for the successful completion of a listening task. (Vandergrift1999: 172) Pre-listening is a kind of warm-up preparing for students to "tune in" to the purpose of the listening passage. First, students need to establish a framework for listening so that learners do not approach the listening practice with no points of reference. This perspective is clearly in line with the use of prior knowledge or schema and establishing of a favorable context. Second, a purposeful listening should be established so that students will know what they will hear and what they are expected to do clearly. Pre-listening activities may take the form of discussion, questions, brainstorming, predicting, and pre-teaching vocabulary, etc. Such activities are aimed to generate language, activate the learner script and set a purpose for listening.

In http://www.sasked.gov.sk.ca/docs/xla/ela15b.html it is known that during the pre-listening phase, teachers need to recognize that all students bring different backgrounds to the listening experience. Beliefs, attitudes, and biases of the listeners will affect the understanding of the message. In addition to being aware of these factors, teachers should show students how their backgrounds affect the messages they receive.

Before listening, students need assistance to activate what they already know about the ideas they are going to hear. Simply being told the topic is not enough. Pre-listening activities are required to establish what is already known about the topic, to build necessary background, and to set purpose(s) for listening. Students need to understand that the

> *... act of listening requires not just hearing but thinking, as well as a good deal of interest and information which both speaker and listener must have in common. Speaking and listening entail ... three components: the speaker, the listener, and the meaning to be shared; speaker, listener, and meaning form a unique triangle*. (King, 1984, p. 177)

Vandegrift in his article, Listening: theory and practice in modern foreign language competence as written in http://www.llas.ac.uk/resources/gpg /67) explained that pre-listening activities help students make decisions about what to listen for and, subsequently, to focus attention on meaning while listening. During this critical phase of the listening process, teachers prepare students for what they will hear and what they are expected to do. First, students need to bring to consciousness their knowledge of the topic, their knowledge of how information is organized in different texts and any relevant cultural information. Second, a purpose for listening must be established so that students know the specific information they need to listen for and/or the degree of detail required. Using all the available information, students can make predictions to anticipate what they might hear.

Secondly, While listening the students do a process during listening to monitor compre-hension during a listening task. During the listening activity itself, students monitor their comprehension and make decisions about strategy use. When students are *maintaining/monitoring* the plan of action, they should ask themselves: *"How am I doing? Am I on the right track? How should I proceed? What information is important to remember? Should I move in a different direction? What do I need to do if I do not understand?"*

During the listening activity itself, students monitor their comprehension and make decisions on the strategy they use. Students need to evaluate continually what they are comprehending and checking: firstly, consistency with their predictions, and secondly, internal consistency; i.e., the ongoing interpretation of the oral text or interaction.

Teachers' intervention during this phase is virtually impossible because of the ephemeral nature of listening. Periodic practice in decision-making skills and strategy use can sharpen inference skills and help students to monitor their activity more effectively.

Thirdlly, after listening, students evaluate the approach and outcomes of a listening task. Students need to evaluate the plan in pre-listening and action in whilst listening. When students are *evaluating,* they should ask themselves: "*How well did I do? Did my particular course of thinking produce more or less than I had expected? What could I have done differently? How might I apply this line of thinking to other problems? Do I need to go back through the task to fill in any "blanks" in my understanding?"*

Post-listening activities is a part that is often neglected by many teacher. In the post-listening period, the teacher and students need to evaluate their output. Zhang Qing (2001) in his article in http://www.jszyw.cn/Article/bzluw/yuluw/200608/44097.html.

Students need to evaluate the results of decisions made during a listening task. The teacher can encourage self-evaluation and reflection by asking students to assess the effectiveness of strategies used. Group or class discussions on the approach taken by different students can also stimulate reflection and valuable evaluation. Students are encouraged to share individual routes leading to success; e.g. how someone guessed (inference) the meaning of a certain word or how someone modified a particular strategy. Vandergrift in http://www.llas.ac.uk/ resources/gpg/67.

Wilson (1999) in Mcmahon and Oliver (2003) argues that the term metacognition can be used in 'vague, confusing, and often contradictory' ways and can be used to describe a range of disparate higher level cognitive skills. She goes on, however, to define metacognition as "awareness individuals have of their thinking and their evaluation and regulation of their thinking". In this definition it is both a state and a process, with 3 functions:

a. Metacognitive awareness - individuals' awareness of their learning process, knowledge about content knowledge, and knowledge about their own strategies
b. Metacognitive evaluation - individuals' judgments of their capacities and limitations

c. Metacognitive regulation - the conscious modification of thinking using cognitive resources.

Metacognitive Awareness

Metacognitive awareness can be defined as having an understanding of language in the abstract (Jessner, 2006), and this understanding develops from an ability to reflect upon language, to manipulate it, to make plans for improving comprehension and to monitor it in real time (Gombert, 1992, as cited in Jessner, 2006; Masny, 1997, as cited in Jessner, 2006). To be metacognitively aware, then, is to have a conscious recognition of one's metacognition, a term originally coined by Flavell (1976) and defined as "one's knowledge concerning one's own cognitive processes and products or anything related to them" (p. 232), and to have the ability to employ metacognitive strategies in order to accomplish a given task. Metacognitive strategies are regulatory in nature and function to oversee, manage, or control behavior-specific cognitive strategies. While there are hundreds of cognitive strategies available to learners (such as inferencing, using mnemonic techniques, or repetition), there are only a handful of metacognitive strategies, and these include planning, monitoring, and evaluating (Vandergrift, 1997; Wenden, 1991), though Chamot, Barnhardt, El-Dinary, and Robbin's (1999) taxonomy also includes problem-solving. Freday, Mary (2011).

Promoting Metacognitive Strategies to Listening Class

To promote the strategies a teacher should do several steps with the students of Listening class

1. Discussing learners' problems,

The first activity should be done by the teacher and the class is discussing the learners' problems of listening English. This activity is to make students aware that they have listening problems. Hence, we (teacher and students) together develop a same commitment to solve the problem. As I did with my class, I asked the students to tell me their belief, their habit, and their problems when listening English. I found a fact that the students are very depended to me. The most of my students said that they will have listening activity if their teacher play listening resources in the class. They become dependent learners. The activity will be ended by the appearance of a good ambition of the class. That is a will of changing their habit from being dependent to be independent learners. The students' dependence in learning will be crucial for building metacognitive awareness.

2. Talking the nature of listening

The second step is talking about the nature of listening. This process is important to make students understand to be effective listeners. The teacher should recognize that teaching listening is not to test the students' listening skill, but it is to teach students learn how to listen. In this step the teachers are suggested to discuss the differences of effective and ineffective listeners. By doing this activity, the students are expected to have a motivation to be effective listeners. They need strategies that direct them to be effective listeners.

3. Building students' awareness about the important of learning strategies

After knowing the nature of listening, the teacher builds the students' awareness about the important of listening strategies. In my experience, I used a movie as a teaching

medium for this case. The movie I chose was *"Akeelah and the Bee"*. Akeelah is a young learner whose high motivation and good strategies in learning English spelling. For she studies hard with her unique learning strategy, she wins the spelling competition in a city in US.

Once watching the film, the teacher is supposed to asks the class to reflect the film character and the influence of learning strategies on the achievement. Hence the students will be aware that learning strategies is very important and beneficial toward learning success.

4. Training metacognitive strategies to students

Training metacognitive strategies means developing students' metacognitive awareness. Four steps in classroom action research is suitable approach to train these strategies. They are planning, acting, observing and reflecting. Here, the students are trained by doing the strategies from pre listening, whilst listening and post listening. Pre listening is to develop planning, whilst listening is aimed to monitor the plan, and post listening is to evaluate the plan and the strategies usage.

5.   Reflection

Reflection is very important for the students. It can make them aware of their listening process. Reflection give two advantages to students; besides knowing their listening awareness, they learn how to be effective listeners by reading the questionaire items. For helping students to do reflection a teacher can distribute metacognitive awareness listening questionnaire designed by L Vandergrift (2006) as follows;

METACOGNITIVE AWARENESS LISTENING QUESTIONNAIRE By Vandergrift, 2006						
Please indicate the level of your agreement or disagreement with each statement by circling the appropriate number: 1 to indicate strong agreement, 6 to indicate strong disagreement						
NO	Strategy belief/ perception	1	2	3	4	5	6
1.	Before I start to listen, I have a plan in my head for how I am going to listen.						
2.	I pay more attention to the text when I have trouble understanding.						
3.	Listening in English is more difficult than reading, speaking, or writing in English.						
4.	I translate in my head as I listen.						
5.	I use the words I understand to help me with the words I don't understand.						
6.	While listening, if I realize I am thinking about other things, I pay attention again right away.						
7.	As I listen, I compare what I understand with what I already know about the topic.						
8.	It is a challenge for me to understand when I listen in English.						
9.	I use my experiences and knowledge to help me understand.						
10.	Before listening, I think of similar things that I have listened to before.						

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11.	I translate key words as I listen.						
12.	When I realize I am not paying attention I quickly try to pay attention again.						
13.	As I listen, my interpretation quickly changes once I realize that it was not correct.						
14.	After listening, I think back to how I listened, and about what I might do differently next time.						
15.	I am not nervous when I listen to English.						
16.	When I have difficulty understanding what I hear, I give up and stop listening.						
17.	I use the general idea of the text to help me guess the meaning of the words I don't understand.						
18.	I translate word-by-word as I listen.						
19.	When I guess the meaning of a word, I think back to everything I have heard to check my guess.						
20.	As I listen, I ask myself if I am happy with my level of understanding.						
21.	I have a goal in my mind as I listen.						

Conclusion

There are many ways for helping your learners in listening class. One of them is using metacognitive strategies. Metacognitive strategies can help students to be effective listeners. If the students listen English effectively, it means they have a good proficiency in listening. However, for many teachers teaching listening do not direct the students to meet the nature of listening. By knowing the concept of metacognition and promoting the metacognitive strategies the teacher are supposed to be able to create effective listeners who recognize the nature of listening and learning listening strategically. Therefore, It is important for teachers to implement the metacognitive strategies to improve students' listening proficiency.

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