Five Reasons Why Listening Strategy Instruction Might Not Work With Lower Proficiency Learners

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Abstract
Despite numerous theoretical discussions and empirical studies that have been generated in the past 30 years or so, a strategic approach to teaching L2 listening has not been whole-heartedly embraced by practitioners, in particular when they work with lower proficiency learners of English. I offer five possible reasons for this: first, the empirical evidence supporting listening strategy instruction is not particularly strong; second, strategy instruction places a rather heavy demand on the teachers; third, teachers are not totally convinced that strategy instruction can solve their students’ listening difficulties which often stem from basic decoding (word recognition) problems; fourth, lower proficiency learners have not acquired a threshold level of proficiency to take full advantage of strategy instruction; finally, there is a possibility that learners may not in fact need to learn strategies, as they may have acquired and used these strategies in their first language. Of these, the first reason, lack of strong empirical support, deserves serious attention from advocates of strategy-based instruction.

Introduction
In a recent paper that appeared in the ELT Journal (Renandya & Farrell, 2011), I pointed out that the empirical evidence for listening strategy instruction is not particularly strong and that there are alternative pedagogical options that one could more profitably explore and bring into the L2 listening classroom. I have since then delved more deeply into the literature and my conclusion remains unchanged, that is, there is no strong empirical evidence for recommending listening strategy instruction in the EFL classroom. This is particularly true when we work with lower proficiency learners of English, who still struggle with basic decoding skills. In this paper, I discuss five reasons why it is not a good idea to spend valuable instructional time on teaching listening strategies.
But first, a brief description of strategy-based instruction is in order. David Mendelsohn (1995), a staunch proponent of the strategy-based approach to teaching L2 listening, defines this approach as follows:

“A strategy-based approach is a methodology that is rooted in strategy instruction... It is an approach that sees the objective of the SL/FL course as being to teach students how to listen. This is done first, by making learners aware of how the language functions – i.e., developing metalinguistic awareness, and second, by making them aware of the strategies that they use – i.e., developing what I call “metastrategic awareness.” Then, the task of the teacher becomes to instruct learners in the use of additional strategies that will assist them in tackling the listening task.”

(p. 134)

In a strategy-based approach, strategies often used by so-called good listeners such as predicting, comprehension monitoring, inferencing, clarifying and summarizing are selected for systematic and intensive teaching in the classroom. These strategies are mostly metacognitive, i.e., they are mental processes that can be used to direct, organize, monitor, and evaluate learning. A typical model of strategy training normally involves some sort of presentation of a strategy, which is then followed by practice of the strategy and then an evaluation of how the strategy works. For maximum benefits, strategy researchers recommend intensive and systematic training of strategies.

**Reason 1: Weak empirical evidence**

If we look at the literature on L2 listening strategies (see for example, Cohen & Macaro, 2007 for a recent review), the majority of the research studies have been descriptive and correlational in nature. These studies almost uniformly demonstrate that there is a relationship between strategy use and proficiency. Green and Oxford (1995), summarizing numerous studies that investigated the relationship between strategy use and proficiency, reported that higher proficiency learners tend to use a larger number, and demonstrate more frequent use, of strategies.

However, the nature of this relationship is not always straightforward. It is not clear whether strategy use influences proficiency or the other way round, i.e., whether proficiency allows
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learners to use effective strategies. Bremner (1998), Rees-Miller (1993), Skehan (1989), and others have pointed out that since correlation is not causation, one cannot say with a high degree of certainty that strategy use leads to increased proficiency. Thus, there is a need to interpret correlational studies with caution. My own view is that strategies do not directly influence proficiency. I tend to agree with the views that the use and choice of strategies by learners are “simply signs of proficiency level” (McIntyre, 1994, p. 188). That is, when learners reach a certain level of proficiency, they tend to use certain strategies. Skehan (1989) also made the same point: “… learner strategies do not determine proficiency, but are permitted by it” (p. 97, emphasis in original).

There is a small number of experimental research studies that have been published recently that show positive experimental effects of strategy training of L2 comprehension (see for example, Graham & Macaro, 2008; Vandergrift, & Tafaghodtari, 2010) but neither was conducted in the ELT context. Both looked at the impact of strategy instruction on adult learners of French as a second language. It is worth noting however, that the experimental effects in both studies were relatively small, thus indicating a somewhat limited pedagogical value, which in turn makes it difficult to endorse a full scale implementation of listening strategy training in the classroom (Hassan et al., 2005; Wang, 2010).

An earlier experimental study conducted by Irene Thomson and Joan Rubin (1996) showed that a two-year strategy instruction with college students learning Russian as a foreign language resulted in an improvement in the students’ listening comprehension. However, closer inspection of the study showed that the statistical analysis of the data was problematic as the authors used a non-parametric statistical procedure (Chi Square) to analyze data that would normally require the use of parametric statistical procedure such as the t-test. In addition, the study failed to report the basic descriptive statistics (means and standard deviations of the experimental and control students’ performance on the tests) normally included in a research study that uses a quantitative methodology, which made it even more difficult to objectively assess the reliability of the statistical analysis (See Zhang 2005 for additional comments on this study).

Thus, in the absence of a strong empirical base, I tend to agree with those who have voiced their scepticism on the usefulness of teaching listening strategies, such as Manchon (2008),
who maintains that “it has never been crystal clear how strategies contribute to language development, and even less clear whether any possible beneficial effects are long lasting” (p. 233).

**Reason 2: Unreasonable demand and opportunity cost**

Strategy instruction places an unreasonable demand on teachers. To implement strategy training, and for optimal results, strategy researchers have suggested that teachers need to know the following:

- they need to know the theories and principles behind strategy training
- they need to know how to select the strategies that the students need to learn
- they need to know the order in which these strategies should be presented and practised
- they need to know how to integrate these strategies into the curriculum
- they need to know how much time should be allocated for strategy training

If we are to follow these suggestions above in a consequential manner, many EFL teachers will find it hard to carry out strategy instruction, as most will have different levels of training (some may have none) in the use of learning strategies. Indeed, these requirements are rather unrealistic and burdensome for the majority of teachers given that they have so much to accomplish in language lessons.

A related reason is that strategy training takes time away from the actual teaching in the classroom. In other words, there is an opportunity cost that learners have to pay. If it is indeed true that intensive and systematic strategy training results in increased language proficiency, then all is well as it is time well spent. But if strategy training does not in fact lead to increased proficiency, valuable instructional time will be wasted. My view is that some strategy training may be useful with some learners, but it should be done judiciously, keeping in mind that strategy training is not the same as language learning. This view is shared by a growing number of researchers (e.g., Littlejohn, 2008; McDonough, 2006; Swan, 2008). As Swan (2008) puts it, “while training in strategy use can contribute usefully to learner independence, this can be taken to unconstructive extremes; and such training is no substitute for basic language teaching” (p. 262).
Reason 3: Teachers’ and students’ views

We often turn to applied linguistics researchers for information about what might or might not work in the classroom. This is a worthwhile thing to do and we should continue to do this. However, it is also important to remember that teachers can also be an excellent source of information about what works or what doesn’t work in the classroom. So it is not a bad idea to turn to classroom teachers and seek their views on pedagogical issues. Indeed, experienced teachers have accumulated a wealth of pedagogical knowledge that can be tapped on to provide us with information about effective and ineffective teaching approaches.

Recent classroom-based research studies provide a glimpse of what teachers and students feel about the utility of strategies in language learning. Wang (2010), for example, reported that a number of the college EFL teachers in her study believed that listening strategies were not particularly useful for lower proficiency learners of English who were still struggling with word recognition problems. One of the teachers has this to say about listening strategies:

> I think my students’ major problems lie in their poor “decoding skills”. I am still a follower of “bottom-up” instruction. Students need to be able to recognize the words in spoken form, for instance, from doing dictation and checking against the transcript... How can they think about strategies when they are still struggling with decoding what is said by the speaker. You can’t expect them to make good use of the context based on the few words that they think they have understood... Strategy might be of some use for the reading skill as students have time to read again and again. But in listening, everything goes so fast that students won’t be able to utilize the strategies. Anyway, the whole idea of teaching strategies does not sound very sensible to me.

(p. 129)

What is interesting is that these teachers and L2 listening researchers seem to hold similar opinions regarding the kinds of listening problems L2 learners have. Both seem to agree that lower proficiency learners face listening problems which are mostly language related (e.g., word recognition, vocabulary load and rate of speech). However, unlike many L2 researchers (e.g., Goh, 2000; Mendelsohn, 2008) who recommend teaching top-down inferencing skills to solve L2 listeners’ decoding problems, experienced teachers seem to favour giving L2 listeners decoding practice to deal with decoding problems. Renandya & Zhang (in prep) for
example found that EFL teachers from China believe that extensive listening practice is key to dealing with a lot of lower level, decoding problems. Below are two interview excerpts from the Renandya & Zhang study:

... more practice, more listening, repeated listening—I think this is the most effective way. You know, a language, especially a foreign language, can only be acquired through repeated practice. (Ms. Gu)

when we listen to something, if we only listen once, we might fail to catch the meaning. But if the person repeats the information, in the first time, I can catch one point. When listening again, I can catch another point. So by listening to the same spoken message, I will be able to piece together the information after several listening. (Ms. Yang)

Reason 4: Threshold level

It might be too early to dismiss listening strategy training with its focus on top-down processing skills as being completely ineffective. More research is needed to better understand the true effects of strategy instructions on language development. One possibility that has been suggested is that perhaps the training of higher level processing skills (such as metacognitively oriented listening strategies mentioned earlier) might prove useful after (not before) learners have built up sufficient linguistic skills that allow them to decode text fluently. If research in L2 reading can be used as a guide (Clarke, 1980), L2 listeners will need to reach a certain threshold of proficiency before they can benefit from strategy instruction. This threshold level probably lies in the intermediate range, but its exact level and nature is not yet known. Understanding the nature of this threshold can be an important area of research as the findings can inform both theory and practice.

There is some preliminary data that seems to support the existence of this threshold level. Zhang (2005) investigated two different modes of instruction by dividing up her middle school (secondary) students into two groups. The first group, the listening strategy group, received intensive training on listening strategies, and the second group, the extensive listening group, received extensive exposure to listening materials via teacher read alouds (see Renandya & Farrell, 2011, for more details). At the end of the six-week long experiment (approximately 42 hours of listening sessions), Zhang’s extensive listening students
performed significantly better in the cloze and recall listening tests than the strategy-based students. What is pertinent here is that while the students in the listening strategy group seemed to have a good grasp of the strategies taught, they seemed to have difficulty applying these strategies! What one student in the strategy group says about the strategy training is telling (Zhang, 2005, cited in Renandya & Farrell, 2011, p. 57):

I’ve hardly had the chance to use the strategies I’ve been taught because I have great difficulty in recognizing the words in the sentences. I always try to catch the words when I listen, but it is so hard for me. The strategies may be good, but they are not so useful for me. I mean it doesn’t really help me when I listen. I feel that it is impossible for me to balance these two things well at the same time. I think I first need to attend to the most important thing for me . . . “

Reason 5: Learners don’t need strategies

Strategies such as predicting and inferencing are probably “innate”, and therefore, “don’t need to be taught” (Krashen, 2011, p. 388). Krashen contends that we make predictions and inferences all the time. We use these “strategies” when we listen or read in our first language and when we do other things in life. And we do this quite naturally. The only time we stop predicting or making inference is when we are baffled or when we experience “temporary processing overload” (Swan, 2008, p. 267). Unfortunately, in second language classrooms, this happens all too often. When our students have to listen to a text that is beyond their current level of competence, they are likely to be bewildered and experience a cognitive overload, resulting in their not being able to use their innate mental capacity. If this is the case, then teaching strategies that learners already possess and use do not seem like the most productive way of using classroom instructional time. Agreeing with Krashen and Swan above, Tony Ridgway (2000) puts the case against the teaching of listening strategies more forcefully as follows:

Teaching listening strategies such as making inferences is a waste of time. There is no cognitive space for employing such strategies in real-time listening. Either the inference is made or it isn’t. There can be no going back to make inferences as we do in reading—the next part of the text is already being processed.

(p. 184)
Conclusion

I am well aware that my view here constitutes a minority position. There are a lot more people in the field who support the claim that listening strategy instruction is a key variable in L2 listening development. However, until stronger empirical data is available, i.e., data that convincingly shows that there is a strong causal link between strategy instruction and listening ability, this claim should be regarded as just that, a claim. Until more reliable data is available, oft-cited quotes such as the following should be seen with healthy scepticism:

... strategies are the L2 learner’s tool kit for active, conscious, purposeful, and attentive learning and they pave the way toward greater proficiency, learner autonomy and self-regulation (emphasis added)


I am however not suggesting that listening strategy instruction is without pedagogical value. Nor am I suggesting that teachers should not teach listening strategies. Indeed, metacognitively-based listening strategies can help learners become more aware of their learning processes, which can in turn help them plan, organize, assess and monitor their learning more effectively (see Zeng, 2012). As I mentioned earlier, the contribution of listening strategies to listening development is indirect, rather than direct. Thus, as a result of training, metacognitively more aware learners may spend more time engaging in productive language learning activities (e.g., doing more listening practice). In Zeng’s (2012) study, Chinese EFL learners who received metacognitive training were more willing to set aside more time to work on their listening. Interestingly, some of these learners reported that they engaged in a lot of repeated listening, i.e., listening to the same materials multiple times. Some reported listening to the same listening passage ten times. According to recent research in L2 listening (e.g., Zhang, 2005; Chang, 2011), repeated listening seems to contribute more directly to fluency in word recognition, which in turn enables L2 listeners to focus more on the higher level cognitive processes of comprehension and inferencing. This line of reasoning seems to confirm research in L2 reading development, which demonstrates the importance of automatizing lower level (linguistic) processes in L2 reading development (see Grabe, 2009).

I must end this paper by saying that despite the rather critical tone of this paper, I have a lot of respect for listening strategy researchers whose work has broadened and deepened our
understanding of the nature and the potential impact of listening strategies on learners’ language development. The amount of work generated by strategy researchers over the past 30 years has definitely enriched our understanding of the central roles that learners can play in enhancing their language learning.

Note

1) It is significant that none of the studies was conducted in an ELT context. One would have thought that since the bulk of the research on L2 listening strategies has been done within the ELT contexts, there should have been experimental studies that produced positive effects. This is not the case, however. I haven’t seen a tightly controlled experimental study published in a mainstream ELT journal that shows the positive impact of listening strategy instruction. What could be the reason for this? One possibility is that people have indeed conducted intervention research studies, but have not been able to show that strategy instruction brings about significant improvements in L2 students’ listening. As is usually the case, studies that produce non-significant findings don’t usually get published in journals.

References


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