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METACOGNITIVE LISTENING STRATEGY TRAINING: EXPLORING ESL PRE-UNIVERSITY STUDENTS' METACOGNITIVE AWARENESS AND THEIR PERCEPTION

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ABSTRACT

This study examines pre-university students' metacognitive knowledge and their perception after nine weeks of metacognitive listening strategy training. In total, 31 students were selected from four intact classes in a matriculation college located in the northern region of Malaysia. Students received 9 weeks of Metacognitive Strategy Training (MST) during their listening classes. Focus group interviews were conducted after the strategy training to elicit students' metacognitive knowledge and their perceptions of MST. Students were divided into five groups for the focus group interviews. Thematic analysis was used to analyse the data. The responses collected from the focus group interviews were reviewed and examined several times to develop themes and subthemes. The findings reveal that students showed a considerable amount of metacognitive knowledge in terms of their role and performance, the process of second language listening, and strategies for listening as second language listeners. Students view MST as helpful and effective to improve their listening skills. Implications for teaching and learning listening in ESL classrooms were discussed.

Keywords: *Listening, metacognitive strategy training, metacognitive knowledge, matriculation*

INTRODUCTION

Individual's receptive skill such as listening has a deep effect on one's language acquisition either in first language (L1) or second language (L2) (Al-Issa, 2000; Hirsch, 2003; Wu-ping, 2006). Numerous studies have explored the way listening comprehension affects L2 learning (Atai & Ghotbeldin, 2011; Oxford, 1993; Vandergrift, 2008). Despite the acknowledgment given to listening skills, most students or educators find it is the most challenging skill to be handled and developed. Listening is the most difficult skill to be developed due to its ephemeral and unobservable nature (Vandergrift, 2008; Buck, 2001; Lynch, 2002) and also the non-repeated nature (Field, 2008). This can be considered a challenge for second language listeners because listening involves an invisible mental process where observing it would be quite challenging (Graham, 2006).

Furthermore, evidence shows that second language listening is the skill which language learners feel the least at ease with (Graham, 2006) and that it is the one they find most difficult to learn (Vandergrift, 2004). Many second language learners struggle in this process of decoding the sounds that they hear to comprehend the meanings. Moreover, Bozorgian (2012) added that this challenge also could lead to frustration, less attention in the classroom, and performing poorly in listening skills. However, recently listening skill has been receiving considerable attention in ESL contexts. This change is due to the acceptance of the fact that listening involves mental processes and verbal communication may not occur if speakers could not understand what they have listened to. Krashen (1985) also highlighted the hypothesis of "comprehensible input" where understanding or comprehending the language input is vital for production. Producing any responses will only occur when the listeners comprehended the input. Thus, listening is slowly being recognised by all academicians. Considering the fact that students can be assisted to overcome their struggle in comprehending a listening text is by raising their metacognitive awareness. Metacognitive awareness or knowledge can be taught in ESL listening classes.

Similarly, researchers emphasized that listening should be taught and learners must be made aware of their mental process while they are listening (Flowerdew and Miller, 2005; Mendelsohn, 1998; Nunan, 1997; Rost 2005). Developing students' listening comprehension also includes teaching the strategies that could increase students' metacognitive awareness. Currently, most of the listening classes use the product based approach where this method tests rather than teaches L2 listening (Field, 2008). According to Mendelsohn (2006) also, L2 listening classes give importance to the result compared to the process. Besides, Usó Juan & Martínez Flor (2016) also agreed that learners of ESL or EFL usually think of listening as a test instead of regarding it as part of the process of acquiring a second language proficiency.

Moreover, most of the language teachers also concentrate on students' correct answers when teaching listening skills. As a result, many students fail to become successful listeners and are unable to understand the listening text. Though the importance of the development of L2 listening is crucial, learners in the normal lesson were not taught to listen effectively (Vandergrift, 2007). Students were not made conscious of the process during listening comprehension. Students in listening lessons just focused on writing the correct answers to pass the listening tests or complete the task given by their teachers. However, Vandergrift (2003) stated that in recent times the direction in listening comprehension is moved to raising students' awareness of the process of listening. Raising awareness could also be achieved by the role of strategy use and strategy instruction. Many studies emphasized and insisted on the concept of language learning strategies. One of the main strategies is metacognitive strategy training. Teachers should provide opportunities for students to practice these strategies to help them to apply suitable strategies in other listening tasks on their own. improve their metacognitive knowledge.

According to Lin (2002) in listening, metacognitive awareness means applying suitable strategies and ideal distribution of resources. Metacognition plays a significant role in each stage of listening comprehension. Schoenfeld (1987) defined metacognition as 'thinking about one's own thinking' or "reflections on cognition", whereby learners would plan, monitor, and evaluate their own learning. Metacognitive knowledge or awareness consists of three components, namely person, task, and strategy knowledge (Cross

& Paris, 1988; Kuhn & Dean, 2004). *Person knowledge* refers to individual characters and behaviours that influence learning while *task knowledge* is knowing the task demands. On the other hand, *strategy knowledge* is the strategy used by learners to attempt the task. Flavell (1997) emphasised that metacognitive knowledge plays an important role in many cognitive activities related to language use such as oral comprehension or communication of information, reading comprehension, writing, language acquisition, and various types of self-instruction (pp. 906). It involves the process of understanding one's own thinking process such as study skills and the ability to self-monitor learning.

Problem Statement

Studies on the awareness of Metacognitive Strategy Training (MST) in the context of ESL listening is still lacking, whereby only a few studies have focused on the influence of learners' metacognitive awareness on their mental development (Goh, 2008; Goh & Taib, 2006). Goh and Taib (2006) did a small-scale study of metacognitive strategy training on young ESL listeners. Reflections of ten primary school students demonstrated some knowledge about their listening and the strategies that they used. This reflects that even young students were able to be aware of their learning through metacognitive strategy instruction. Also, Goh (2008) stated that it is important to investigate and clarify the role of metacognitive instructions and their effects on listening comprehension and metacognition to improve teaching practice, especially in the context of ESL.

Some studies showed some positive effects of higher metacognitive awareness on learners' listening comprehension. Tavakoli, Shahraki, and Rezazadeh's (2012) result revealed that listeners' metacognitive awareness had some positive relationship in learners' listening performance and higher-level students used higher use of problem-solving and directed attention. Besides, Al-Alwan, Asassfeh, and Shboul (2013) stated that awareness in problem-solving, planning and evaluation, and directed attention components described 56% of the variance in students listening performance in their study. In addition to the above studies, Li's (2013) study also revealed that metacognitive awareness had a significant difference in distinguishing between good

listeners and poor listeners. L2 students' metacognitive awareness of listening includes self-perception awareness, realizing listening demands, goals of cognitive and learners' approaches, and strategies in learning (Vandergrift, Goh, Mareschal & Tafaghodtari, 2006). Thus, this study is a part of a thesis on the effect of MST where the focus of this article is on students' metacognitive knowledge.

The research objectives of this study are to identify the effect of metacognitive strategy training on pre-university students' metacognitive awareness and to explore students' perspectives on the use of MST in enhancing their listening strategies and metacognitive knowledge.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

For this article, the chosen design was an exploratory study. The data was collected using focus group interviews with 31 students who received Metacognitive Strategy Training for nine weeks. The students were considered to be mixed-ability students with high, average, and low scores in the Malaysian Certificate of Education (SPM) English paper. The participants were homogenous in terms of their age (above 18 years old) and consist of 26 females and 5 male students. The students were divided into 5 groups according to their intact classes. Each group consists of five to six students, as suggested by Krueger and Casey (2002). If a focus group is bigger like ten 10 participants, the topic would be a minor concern to the participants. However, in this study, metacognitive strategy training was the main intervention conducted for the students. Thus, a smaller number would be more productive.

Instruments

The instruments used in this study consisted of the MST training module and interview protocol. These instruments are described in the following sections:

The metacognitive listening strategy training module

The metacognitive listening strategy training module was validated by two lecturers from a local university. In total, six out of ten criteria listed in the module were rated as 'very good', while two criteria were given an 'excellent' rating and only one criterion was rated as 'good'. Therefore, changes were made to the lesson plans based on the experts' validation. The training module consisted of lesson plans based on MPS by Vandergrift & Goh (2012) for the treatment group, lesson plans for the control group, worksheets for classroom listening and online listening, an audio CD, and a performance checklist for students (Vandergrift, 1997). The same audio materials and worksheets for listening activities were used for both treatment and control groups and extracted from the book entitled 'Ace Ahead Text MUET' (6th Edition) (Choo, Yeoh, Stanley Nyanaprakasan, & Yee, 2014).

Focus Group Interview

A focus group interview is used to identify how people think, their perceptions, and feelings but not to determine a consensus decision regarding an issue Puvanesvary, Radziah, Sivabala Naidu, Mastura, Noor Fadhillah, & Noor Hashima, (2008). Besides, Krueger (1994) also stated that decision-makers can gather information about their programme based on the interviewees' responses. If the interview is conducted after the service or programme, it is considered as an assessment of the programme or service. Thus, in this study, the focus group interview was conducted to identify the students' perceptions of metacognitive strategy training and their metacognitive knowledge. This was a semi-structured interview which consisted of four prepared questions related to the strategies that were used by the students, strategies that worked or did not work for them, and the students' overall view on MST (Appendix A). The respondents were informed about the purpose of the interviews and were promised the highest level of confidentiality. Pseudonyms were used instead of their real names. Each respondent was required to sign a consent form and was informed that he or she was free to withdraw from the research at any time or any point and the researcher has no authority to bind them to the completion of the research.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Qualitative data from the students' interviews were analysed using the thematic analysis based on *Person*, *Task*, and *Strategy Knowledge* concepts proposed by Flavell (1997) and Goh (2008). *Person knowledge* is what learners think about themselves as learners and as other individuals. It is more focused on self-efficacy about listening. On the other hand, *task knowledge* focuses on the factors that influence listening such as the text or the speaker. Besides, it also includes any form of methods used to improve listening outside the classroom. Lastly, *strategy knowledge* is related to the different strategies that learners use to facilitate their listening comprehension as well as handle the difficulties in the listening process. The interviews were recorded using a digital voice recorder, transcribed, and interpreted holistically based on *person knowledge*, *task knowledge*, and *strategy knowledge*. The responses gathered from the focus group interviews were reviewed and examined several times to derive themes and subthemes (Hatch, 2002; Patton, 2002; Rubin, & Rubin, 2011).

The process of reading and re-reading the transcribed data was followed by the use of open coding for emerging themes that were executed by marking as well as highlighting the keywords in the transcription. Similarly, axial coding was done for theme consistency regarding the concepts and patterns. Finally, selective coding was completed for the main categories and this process resulted in the identification of certain important themes related to the findings of this study.

Metacognitive Knowledge

The qualitative findings also indicated evidence of metacognitive knowledge being acquired by the students. Metacognitive knowledge was analysed based on the categorisation and descriptions of metacognitive knowledge previously proposed by Goh (1997) and Flavell (1979). The students' opinions were categorised under *person*, *task*, and *strategic knowledge*.

Person Knowledge

Person knowledge refers to individual characters and behaviours that influence learning. The interview data obtained for this category revealed several aspects such as cognitive enterprises, steps for listening development, and obstacles in listening. The most frequently mentioned aspects of the cognitive process were translating or guessing and predicting.

The extract below shows one of the cognitive processes mentioned by the students during the listening process which was translating and guessing. Adam mentioned that he usually listened to the keywords related to the topic given, guessed the word, and translated it into his mother tongue, which is the Malay language.

“For me, I usually use my own strategy which is to listen to the keyword and the topic that is given to me. I will guess the word and translate it to Bahasa Malaysia so that I can understand the meaning of the topic.” (Adam)

Adam explained that he used his own strategy during listening which was to focus only on important keywords related to the topic and at the same time, guess the meaning, and translate it into his mother tongue (L1). He related the words to the context of the Malay language (L1) to understand the text. Similarly, Rai reported that she was able to use the guessing strategy based on her prior knowledge. She would even think if her guess was logical or otherwise.

“The strategy that I used when answering the questions was to try to guess the meaning of the word and when I guessed the meaning of the word, I would reflect on everything else that has happened before to see if any of my guesses make sense or not.” (Rai)

Another strategy mentioned by students under the cognitive process was the prediction. Students were found to predict frequently before listening to the task. Natasya reported that she has learned how to predict the topic given and revealed that she used her prior knowledge to attempt the listening task.

“From my experience, I am aware that when we know the topic, we can predict the question and predict the answer as well. I can learn how to predict but before this when I got the answer... I predicted the questions. I will think about the answer that I have learned... I will never predict something which is related to new knowledge.”
(Natasya).

She explained that during the listening process, she only listened to and answered the questions. Her mission was only to accomplish the task. She never predicted what to listen to. This observation was supported by another student, Nafisah, who used prediction as a strategy.

“I find that listening in English is more difficult than reading or writing in English. So, my strategy during listening is to predict the text that I will hear.” (Nafisah)

She agreed that listening in English was a challenge for her, and thus used the prediction strategy to help her in her listening task. She predicted what she would hear during the listening task.

Another theme that emerged in *person knowledge* was steps for listening development. Planning was one of the sub-categories mentioned by the students. Michellie indicated that one of the steps for her listening development was planning. She explained the reasons to have a plan before listening and she believed that planning could help her to listen better.

“In my opinion, to be a good listener, we should have a plan because while listening to the speaker ...we might be distracted with our friends’ noisiness and we won’t understand what the speaker is trying to convey. We might give up easily. So, to avoid all these from happening during the listening test, we should have a perfect plan on how to listen.... if we are distracted, we must come back to the text or to the listening task as soon as possible to answer the question. I think we should have a plan.” (Michellie)

Michellie stated that she was easily distracted by the background noises during the test. As a result, it was difficult for her to listen to what the speaker was trying to convey. So, by having a plan during the listening task, she could overcome the distractions and revisit the questions that were left behind. Planning helped her to stay focused on the task.

The third theme that emerged in *person knowledge* was obstacles to listening comprehension. Among the obstacles described were noises and lack of knowledge in English.

Faiq felt that he could not listen well if he was in a public place such as the library. The background noise from the environment was not suitable for him to attempt the listening task. Noises distracted him from listening.

“For the online listening task that is done through the portal, I think it depends on the situation. For example, I have done it in the computer lab at the library and it is quite difficult... it is difficult to listen from the speaker since I cannot hear clearly. I guess if I do it in my room or a more personal space, maybe I can do a lot better.”
(Faiq)

Similarly, Rai said that she could not understand the text clearly due to the echo in the room and the noises made by people in the room.

“Echo of the speaker... I cannot understand the text clearly because of the speaker... so it is difficult to understand the text and that is one type of distraction that I faced during the listening task.” (Rai)

She further reiterated,

“The main distraction that I face during listening is the surrounding environment. I was surrounded by many people during the listening task. Maybe the noises made me lose focus on the text.” (Rai)

Nafisah mentioned that listening in English was more difficult as compared to other language skills and she stated that she used some steps to help her such as prediction to overcome this obstacle. She realised that her own lack of knowledge in the English language was one of the obstacles in listening.

“For me, some people have a lack of knowledge (in the English language). They do less reading, sometimes. And I am one of them.” (Nafisah)

Therefore, these students reported that background noises from the surrounding area and their friends were distractions that became obstacles to effective listening.

Task Knowledge

Task knowledge focuses on the general factors affecting listening comprehension which include mental, affective, and social processes. For task knowledge, students mentioned that they had difficulty with texts such as unfamiliar words, accent, and speed of the speaker as well as noises. The text was the first theme that emerged in *task knowledge* and the sub-category was unfamiliar words. Fatimatu mentioned about the unfamiliar words in the listening text and how she felt when hearing words that were not commonly used in daily lives. She reiterated,

“I felt so challenged to understand each word during the listening test. It is easier to understand the word which was related to the question to answer the listening test because some words are so difficult and not used daily.” (Fatimatu)

She explained that she was perturbed by the unfamiliar words used by the speaker in the listening text.

The second theme mentioned was related to the speaker's accent and speed. The extracts below illustrate the students' task knowledge on the speakers themselves. Tan said that the speaker's accent made it difficult for him to listen well. On the other hand, Ann mentioned

that she could not remember words that she listened to because the speaker talked too fast. Both of them stated,

“Hmmm, for me I think that every person has a different accent... for me, listening is quite difficult as compared to others.” (Tan)

“Listening word by word, I can’t remember each word I listened too. So, by the time I write while listening to the audio... it is faster compared to what I can write.” (Ann)

Ann mentioned that the speed of the speaker was way too fast as she failed to remember every word she listened to and write down the words at the same time due to the speed and the intelligibility of the speaker.

Strategy Knowledge

Strategy knowledge is the strategy learners use to attempt the task. The students demonstrated quite a high level of strategy knowledge after the MST. The students used more top-down listening strategies in their listening practices. For top-down listening strategies, students will use their background knowledge to understand the text. Some of the frequently mentioned strategies used by the students were prediction, peer discussion, and guessing. The following extracts illustrate the strategies used by the students.

Thiveya stated that prediction was useful for her. She agreed that prediction helped her to generate ideas about the topic. She said,

“From MST, the main strategy that I use is prediction. When I predict something related to the topic, I have an idea of the topic and it is really useful whenever I listen to the topic.” (Thiveya)

Likewise, Tan was able to imagine his prediction and even illustrated how he predicted before listening.

“For me, it is prediction ...For example, just like drawing, in your brain, you have to start thinking... what

is drawing... for example, we are going to think about the tools that we are going to use to draw and what is the famous drawing in the world...So, you will collect data in your brain and analyse it yourself... after you hear the text, you will understand what is the data in your head that the speaker is talking about... for me, prediction and imagination are the techniques and strategies that I got from this (MST).” (Tan)

Another strategy mentioned was peer discussion. In the extract below, Afiqah realised the need to discuss what she heard from the listening text with her friends. By doing so, she could check her answers with her friends.

“For me, I will discuss it with my friends. When I discuss what I heard from the listening text with friends... it is different between my friends’ answer and my answer. I can share it with my friends. I can see what differences we share.” (Afiqah)

From this extract, Afiqah mentioned that discussion helped her to see the differences in opinions, particularly when identifying what they picked up from the listening text.

Students’ Perspectives on Metacognitive Strategy Training

The data obtained from the focus group interviews indicated that MST was effective and helpful. Most of the students stated that MST helped them to answer the listening questions effectively. They also indicated that they were able to learn new listening strategies that helped them to answer the questions and eventually reduced their nervousness and anxiety during the listening task. The extracts described below illustrate the students’ views on MST.

Intan admitted that she lost concentration during the listening task due to the lack of awareness regarding the strategies to be used. However, she stated that she learned how to improve her listening skills from MST.

“Yes, it is very effective because before I did this training (MST) I lost my concentration when I performed the listening task. Using these strategies, I learned to improve myself in listening and changed my strategy to make my listening task more effective.” (Intan)

Similarly, Khalida believed that MST was effective as she could manage her listening task by planning before listening and controlling her nervousness during the listening task although the task was difficult.

“I think that this technique is effective because it teaches me to plan before I do the listening task. So, if I have planned before doing the task, I can manage it... I am not easily nervous as I was before (listen), even if the text was difficult to understand.” (Khalida)

Khalida was aware of her obstacles in listening and knew how to overcome her fear. She reported that planning helped her to manage the listening process as well as reduce her anxiety.

Similarly, Ros and Sangthia indicated that they learned new strategies during MST and these strategies helped them not only to answer the listening questions but also to use them effectively.

For me, this strategy is very helpful because I have a (new) strategy to answer all the questions.” (Ros)

“I feel like the strategy is actually very good because it has helped me a lot. It also helped me to answer the questions easily. I know how to answer it by using this strategy.” (Sangthia)

REFLECTION

Students

Metacognitive knowledge can be used by students to understand a listening text. It also allows students to be more effective in

understanding the information given during lectures. Besides, improvement in metacognitive knowledge also will encourage learners to manage their learning processes. Managing own learning is vital as it has some influence in the overall academic success. Students would be able to perform well in their academic achievement if their listening skills were improved. Most of the tertiary education teaching and learning processes involve listening skills. Carrier (2003) stated that the capability of utilising effective strategies in students' academic listening is very important for L2 learners. Thus, this study will be beneficial as it provides one possible method of helping students to improve their academic performance indirectly by providing them with effective listening strategies through metacognitive strategy training.

Teachers

Information on how to effectively include strategy training in listening lessons can be gained from the study. The concept of integrating listening lesson plans with metacognitive strategies can be provoked from this study for future use of teachers. This is necessary because the new method should use to increase the performance of students' listening. According to Carrier (2003), knowing how to systematically teach metacognitive strategies in L2 classroom is essential because the success of learners to comprehend authentic aural inputs meaningfully would prepare them for higher academic achievement. Hence, educators can employ a variety of teaching approaches to tackling listening skills in classrooms.

CONCLUSION

This study investigated the impact of metacognitive strategy training in enhancing L2 students' listening performance and metacognitive knowledge. The focus group interview data indicated that MST was effective and helpful. Students became aware of the new strategies while attending the listening classes and were able to use them independently without any assistance from the teacher. For instance, Vandergrift (2002) stated that students who were exposed to metacognitive strategies will become autonomous learners in

their future listening tasks. Also, Mareschal (2007) also stressed that students who received metacognitive strategy training were able to self-regulate themselves while completing their listening tasks compared to those who did not receive the training. Furthermore, Cross (2012) mentioned that metacognitive experiences acted as a trigger for self-regulation and management of L2 listening. Therefore, if the metacognitive strategy training made a difference in both the L2 listeners' listening level and metacognitive awareness, it can be used as an important variable in guiding the students' understanding of a listening text. For future studies, focus group interviews should be conducted before and after the metacognitive strategy training. This is to compare students' metacognitive knowledge pre and post strategy training. This would able us to identify the effectiveness of the metacognitive strategy training in depth.

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APPENDIX A : Focus Group Interview Questions

1. Could you please tell me about your experience of metacognitive strategy training and online listening practice?
2. What have you learnt (if anything) by using metacognitive strategies in attempting listening task?
3. Do you think metacognitive strategy training is effective for you? Why do you say so?
4. Do you intend to keep using any one of the metacognitive strategies (stated in question 2) in attempting future listening tasks? If so could you explain why?