

LISTENING COMPREHENSION STRATEGIES: A CASE STUDY OF EFL LEARNERS AT A UNIVERSITY IN VIETNAM

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ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
Received: 18/3/2024	Listening is considered the most challenging skill for numerous English foreign language students. However, learners can enhance their proficiency and self-confidence by employing their language learning strategies appropriately. This paper attempts to investigate English foreign language learners' listening comprehension strategies. The participants were twelve English majors at a university in Vietnam. The case study design was adopted in this research project. The source of data was captured using the think-aloud approach. The data was coded and classified with the use of O'Malley and Chamot's (1990) and Oxford's (1990) taxonomies of Language Learning Strategies, then quantitatively analysed using SPSS for descriptive and inferential statistics. Results indicated that the students utilized the three categories: metacognitive, cognitive and social/affective strategies. Furthermore, there emerged several variations in the learners' choice of learning strategies regarding gender and task types. Specially, the students' use of listening comprehension strategies pertaining to task types was found statistically significantly different despite no significant difference between the male and female listeners. The study suggests implications for the language classroom instruction on listening comprehension strategies in future inquiries.
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CHIẾN LƯỢC NGHE HIỂU: NGHIÊN CỨU ĐIỂN HÌNH VỀ SINH VIÊN TIẾNG ANH TẠI MỘT TRƯỜNG ĐẠI HỌC Ở VIỆT NAM

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THÔNG TIN BÀI BÁO	TÓM TẮT
Ngày nhận bài: 18/3/2024	Nghe được coi là kỹ năng khó nhất đối với nhiều sinh viên tiếng Anh. Tuy nhiên, sinh viên có thể nâng cao trình độ và sự tự tin hơn bằng cách sử dụng các chiến lược học ngôn ngữ thích hợp. Bài báo này nhằm tìm hiểu chiến lược nghe hiểu của người học tiếng Anh. Đối tượng tham gia là 12 sinh viên chuyên ngành tiếng Anh tại một trường đại học ở Việt Nam. Nghiên cứu này sử dụng thiết kế nghiên cứu trường hợp. Nguồn dữ liệu được thu thập bằng phương pháp nói to suy nghĩ (think-aloud). Dữ liệu thu thập được giải mã và phân loại sử dụng các nguyên tắc phân loại Chiến lược học ngôn ngữ của O'Malley và Chamot (1990), Oxford (1990), sau đó được phân tích định lượng qua phần mềm SPSS để thu được số liệu thống kê mô tả và suy diễn. Kết quả cho thấy sinh viên đã sử dụng ba loại chiến lược: siêu nhận thức, nhận thức và xã hội/tình cảm. Hơn nữa, có một số khác biệt trong việc lựa chọn chiến lược học tập của người học liên quan đến giới tính và dạng bài nghe. Đặc biệt, các chiến lược nghe hiểu liên quan đến các dạng bài nghe có sự khác biệt có ý nghĩa thống kê mặc dù không có sự khác biệt đáng kể giữa sinh viên nam và nữ. Nghiên cứu đề xuất tiến hành các nghiên cứu tiếp theo về dạy các chiến lược nghe hiểu trong lớp học tiếng.
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1. Introduction

Compared with other language skills, listening is considered the most challenging skill for multiple English foreign language (EFL) students. Theoretically, listening comprehension (LC) is viewed as an active and conscious process in which listeners construct meaning via cues from contextual information and from existing knowledge [1]. Additionally, listeners generate information in their long-term memory and make their own interpretation of the oral texts [2]. Given that listeners have the limited memory capacity for the target language, they employ different strategies for LC [3]. Using language learning strategies appropriately is more likely to result in improved proficiency and greater self-confidence [3], [4], which reveals that raising learners' awareness of listening comprehension strategies (LCS) increases the likelihood of enhancing their listening skills. As reminded by [5, p.1], "give a man a fish and he eats for a day. Teach him how to fish and he eats for a lifetime". Simply providing learners with a large amount of listening input is not sufficient to develop their listening comprehension; they should therefore be taught how to listen effectively or effective learning strategies [6] to regulate their listening learning.

Language learning strategies (LLS) have been differently defined by a greater number of linguistic scholars and researchers [3], [4], [7]. According to [7, p.1], LLS are "the special thoughts or behaviors that individuals use to help them comprehend, learn, or retain new information". In addition, as defined by [3, p.8], LLS refers to "operations employed by the learner to aid the acquisition, storage, retrieval, and use of information...; specific actions taken by the learners to make learning easier, faster, more enjoyable, more self-directed, more effective, and more transferable to new situations". Despite several variations, these definitions all highlight learners' thoughts or actions that assist their language learning effectively [3], [7]. For the purpose of this study, Oxford's and O'Malley and Chamot's definitions serve as useful bases for understanding learners' listening strategies.

Regarding listening strategies, they involve bottom-up and top-down strategies [8]. Bottom-up strategies consisting of listening for specific details, recognizing cognates, and recognizing word-order patterns allow listeners to use their knowledge of the language, such as combining sounds, words, and grammar to construct meaning in the message. In contrast, top-down strategies require listeners to utilize their prior knowledge of the topic, the context, the type of text, and the language to make sense of what is heard and anticipate what will come next. These strategies encompass listening for the main idea, predicting, drawing inferences, and summarizing. As pointed out by [9], listening comprehension is considered an interactive interplay between bottom-up and top-down processes by using linguistic and real-world information.

Multiple classification schemes or taxonomies of LLS have been developed by numerous researchers in the field [3], [7], [10]. Of these taxonomies, Oxford [3] and O'Malley and Chamot [7] adopted the information processing theory of cognition and they both split LLS into three categories: metacognitive, cognitive and social/ affective strategies. Metacognitive strategies refer to planning and monitoring progress, or reviewing accomplishment and future direction of learning, whereas cognitive strategies are defined as more specific learning tasks that require more direct manipulation of the learning material itself. Social/affective strategies involve what learners need to work with social-mediating activities and interactions with others. The Metacognitive group encompasses seven individual strategies, such as planning, directed attention, selective attention, self-management, self-monitoring; self-evaluation, and problem identification. The Cognitive group comprises twelve specific strategies: repetition, resourcing, grouping, notetaking, deduction/induction, substitution, elaboration, imagery, summarization, translation, transfer, and inferencing. Additionally, the Social/affective category consists of four individual strategies like questioning for clarification, cooperation, self-task, and self-reinforcement.

In this study, O'Malley and Chamot's [7], and Oxford's [3] taxonomies were adapted and

served as the theoretical underpinning to construct a coding scheme for coding and classifying listening comprehension strategies (LCS) used by the participating students. One of the rationales underlying the use of the two taxonomies is that the classification scheme of LLS proposed by [3] has been most widely and frequently utilized since it provides the most comprehensive taxonomy of LLS to date [11], [12]. Another lies in O'Malley's and Chamot's [7] robust and consistent classification scheme as it has been empirically tested and constructed based on cognitive theories, and widely used by both teachers and researchers in the field [13]. We primarily employed the three-part strategy taxonomy by [7] consisting of 22 individual strategies as two individuals namely, directed attention and selective attention in Metacognitive category by [7] which were replaced with paying attention in Oxford's [3] to make this strategy concise.

With regard to factors affecting EFL learners' strategy use, various factors significantly influence learners, for instance, proficiency, age, gender, task type, attitudes, motivation, personality, and learning styles [3], [7], [13], [14]. For the scope of the study, only gender and task type were mainly discussed. In terms of gender, females employed a wider range of learning strategies and used strategies more effectively [15], although males sometimes surpassed females in the employment of learning strategies [16]. Also, differences in gender had a "profound influence" on strategy use [17, p.296]. As confirmed by [3], [7] task demands have a heavy influence on the strategies selected. Students utilized different strategies when performing different language tasks, or no single learning strategy will work in every case [18].

LCS have been investigated by various researchers in both second and foreign language contexts [10], [14], [19], [20]. Findings indicated that learners prevalently adopted metacognitive, cognitive and social/ affective strategies; and differences emerged in learners' use of listening strategies regarding proficiency, gender, and task types. However, little empirical research has, to my best knowledge, been carried out to uncover the LCS used by Vietnamese EFL learners, particularly by those at the tertiary level in Vietnam [21], [22]. Taking the significance of learning strategies for listening comprehension and the stated problem into consideration, we would therefore like to conduct this research project to examine listening comprehension strategies employed by EFL students at a university. Specially, this study aimed to address the following research questions:

1. What listening comprehension strategies are employed by the EFL learners?
2. Are there differences in their use of listening comprehension strategies regarding gender and task types?

The following sections depict methodology, results and discussion, and conclusion and implication.

2. Methodology

The case study design was adopted in this study. Strategies of convenient sampling in which "choosing settings, groups, and/or individuals that are conveniently available and willing to participate in the study" [23, p.286] were employed in this study. Accordingly, the participants of this study embraced 12 sophomore majors of English at a university in Vietnam with six males and six females. The students' average age was 20 and their English proficiency was at the intermediate level (B1). Think-aloud or self-revelation, "stream-of-consciousness disclosure of thought processes while the information is being attended to" [24, p.34], was employed as the sole instrument for the data source. The rationales underlying the use of this tool lie in its appropriateness for receptive tasks [7] and its prevalence in listening strategy studies.

The think-aloud protocol encompassed two sessions: (1) Briefing, and (2) Think-aloud. In the Briefing session, we first stated the purpose of the study, and then explained some think-aloud procedures to the students. In the think-aloud session, we first provided the students with a warm-up task to train their verbalization and reduce their tension prior to verbal report of the listening comprehension tasks. After that, the students were asked to listen to two audio texts of

about 300 - 350 words for each to complete the two tasks such as Answering questions, True/False; and report what they were thinking to comprehend the texts after each of the pre-determined pauses. The students had an option to think aloud in either Vietnamese or English. However, they chose Vietnamese to verbalize. All of the conversations were audio-recorded for later verbatim transcription and analysis.

Concerning data analysis, students' LC strategies were coded and classified with the employment of O'Malley and Chamot's [7] and Oxford's [3] taxonomies of LLS encompassing three categories: Metacognitive, Cognitive and Social/ affective strategies; and their 22 individual strategies. The coded strategies were then analysed quantitatively using SPSS (Statistical Package for Social Sciences), version 27 for descriptive and inferential statistics. In comparisons of the utilization of LCS between male and female listeners, and Tasks A and B, the null hypothesis is that there are no differences in their strategy use. If a significant level (p) is equal to or less than .05, the null hypothesis will be rejected [25].

3. Findings and discussion

3.1. Students' Use of Listening Comprehension Strategies

Overall findings from the analyses of twelve students' LCS use indicated that they employed 16 specific strategies under three major categories namely, Metacognitive, Cognitive and Social/affective. As clearly displayed from Table 1, Metacognitive strategies were most frequently used by the students with the mean value of $M= 4.611$, $SD= 1.476$, followed by Cognitive ($M= 1.787$, $SD= 1.172$) and Social/affective ($M= .583$, $SD= .996$).

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics for Listening Comprehension Strategies

LC Strategies	N	Mean	S.D
Metacognitive	12	4.611	1.476
Self-monitoring	12	7.500	1.624
Paying attention	12	6.000	1.537
Problem identification	12	4.833	1.992
Self-evaluation	12	4.833	1.030
Self-management	12	2.583	1.165
Planning	12	1.917	1.505
Cognitive	12	1.787	1.172
Elaboration	12	5.417	1.443
Inferencing	12	3.667	2.230
Substitution	12	1.500	1.314
Taking notes	12	1.417	1.730
Grouping	12	1.083	.669
Translation	12	.917	1.084
Summarization	12	.833	.577
Transfer	12	.667	.985
Imagery	12	.583	.515
Social/affective	12	.583	.996
Questioning for clarification	12	.583	.996

Regarding Metacognitive strategies, self-monitoring was employed with the highest frequency ($M= 7.500$, $SD= 1.624$), whereas planning strategy was the least preferred by the students ($M= 1.917$, $SD= 1.505$). The other individual strategies of Metacognitive, such as self-management, self-evaluating, problem identification and paying attention varied in their frequency levels from $M= 2.583$, $SD= 1.165$ to $M= 6.00$, $SD= 1.537$. These findings are, to greater extent, consistent with those of [26], which exhibited the students' greater employment of metacognitive strategies, such as self-monitoring, planning strategy and self-evaluating.

In terms of Cognitive strategies, the results indicated elaboration as the most frequently used

strategy (M= 5.417, SD= 1.443), accompanied by inferencing (M= 3.667, SD= 2.230). The least fell in imagery strategy (M= .583, SD= .515). The other Cognitive strategies with lower frequency, such as transferring, summarizing, translating, grouping, taking notes and substituting ranged in frequency from M= .667, SD= .985 to M= 1.500, SD= 1.314. These results highly mismatch with those in Young's [14] research study in which Cognitive strategies have been reported with the highest level of frequency, and the students spent significantly more time regulating and managing information than manipulating it.

With Social/Affective category, interestingly, only 'questioning for clarification' preferred by the students demonstrated the least frequently used strategy category (M= .583, SD= .996). This finding is robustly convergent with that of Naoko's [27] in which the Social/affective Strategies had the lowest average frequency. This finding may be resulted from the students' unfamiliarity with paying attention to their own feelings and social relationships [3] during their listening tasks, and the nature of this study which makes it impossible to confirm their actual use of the social/affective strategy.

Interestingly, Metacognitive and Cognitive strategies were prevalently employed to promote the students' listening comprehension. This result sharply accords with that in [3], [7] studies. The finding demonstrated that the students in this study relied heavily on these strategies including bottom-up and top-down strategies to comprehend oral messages. As emphasized by [13, p.195], "a cognitive strategy is like a worker who tries to complete a given task while a metacognitive strategy is like the supervisor who tells the workers what to do, keeps an eye on the worker, and then inspects the complete product". Thus, metacognitive and cognitive strategies are often used together, supporting each other [7].

The next section analyses the students' LCS use according to gender and task types.

3.2. Differences in the Use of LCS

3.2.1. Differences in the Use of LCS between Male and Female Students

Overall results from the independent t-test revealed that female listeners generally surpassed their male counterparts in the utilization of all the three categories. As depicted in the table 2, the greatest disparity between the two groups was tracked in the metacognitive category in which the mean value for the female listeners (M= 4.806, SD= 1.850) was substantially higher compared to that for the male listeners (M= 4.195, SD= 1.373), accompanied by the cognitive category in which the mean score for the females (M= 2.001, SD= 1.571) was found higher than that for the males (M=1.611, SD= 0.987). The smallest difference was observed in the social/affective M=2.000, SD= 1.897 for the females versus M= 0.167, SD= 0.408 for the males.

However, the overall results (see Table 2) showcased no statistically significant difference between the two groups in the use of the three LC strategy categories ($p > .005$).

Table 2. LCS Categories Used by Male and Female Listeners

LCS Categories	Male (N=6)		Female (N=6)		P
	M	SD	M	SD	
Metacognitive	4.195	1.273	4.806	1.850	.006
Cognitive	1.611	0.987	2.001	1.571	.091
Social/Affective	0.167	0.408	2.000	1.897	.181

Significant level: $p < .005$

With reference to individual LCS, findings indicated that certain differences emerged between the male and female listeners. Concerning the metacognitive category, the female listeners' higher mean scores than their male counterparts' were displayed on all of the six items: planning (M= 2.667, SD= 1.211), self-monitoring (M= 8.000, SD= 1.414), self-management (M= 6.167, SD= 3.312), and self-evaluation (M= 5.667, SD= 1.367), whereas the male listeners used paying attention (M= 5.667, SD= .816) and problem identification (M=

4.333, SD= 2.066) more frequently than their female counterparts (M= 3.833, SD= 1.722 and M= 2.500, SD= 2.074 respectively). Of the cognitive category, the strategies employed more regularly by the female listeners encompassed inferencing (M= 4.333, SD= 2.422), translation (M= 1.833, SD= 2.714), note-taking (M= 1.833, SD= .983), transfer (M= .667, SD= .816), grouping (M= 2.667, SD= 2.422), and imagery (M= .833, SD= .408). On the contrary, those utilized more often by the male listeners were elaboration (M= 5.333, SD= 1.505), substitution (M= .833, SD= .753). Similarly, ‘questioning for clarification’ in the social/affective category was more frequently employed by the female listeners (M= 2.000, SD= 1.897) than their male counterparts (M= 4.667, SD= .408).

Although there was no statistically significant difference between males and female students in the use of the three strategy groups, differences ($p < .05$) between the two parties were found statistically significant regarding the two metacognitive strategies: paying attention ($p = 0.04$), self-management ($p = 0.015$); and questioning for clarification ($p = 0.049$).

In this study, a wider range of LCS with higher frequencies in favor of females strongly accords with that of multiple previous studies [15] which favoured females as more frequent users of strategies. The results suggest that if female students are naturally more proficient in employing learning strategies to regulate their listening, then male students might need more overt support in developing such strategies. As [15, p.291] point out “... gender difference trends in strategy use ... this means that women and men are using different approaches to language learning...”. Teachers should therefore implement strategy instruction as a regular part of language teaching and learning so that both male and female students can maximise their learning power [28].

On the basis of these findings, it could be concluded that the students’ LCS use was related to gender. In other words, gender, to some extent, influences the students’ use of LCS.

3.2.2. Differences in the Use of LCS regarding Task Types

Table 3 shows the statistics for the number of strategies used by twelve students in Task A and Task B. In general, the average frequencies for all of the three strategies employed in Task A were found higher than those in Task B. As illustrated in Table 3, greater mean scores for Task A were explicitly displayed in the metacognitive (M= 2.806, SD= .382), cognitive (M= 1.185, SD= .297), and social/affective strategies (M= .500, SD= 1.000). Specially, overall results from the paired sample t-test (Table 3) revealed a statistically significant difference in the students’ employment of LCS between Task A (M= 2.806, SD= .382) and Task B (M= 1.806, SD= 0.332), $df(11) = .691$, $p < .005$ (two-tailed).

Table 3. LCS Categories Used in Tasks A and B

LCS Categories	Task A		Task B		df (11)	p
	M	SD	M	SD		
Metacognitive	2.806	.382	1.806	.332	1.000	.011
Cognitive	1.185	.297	.611	.230	.574	.001
Social/Affective	.500	1.000	.000	.000	.500	.001
Overall	2.806	.382	1.806	.332	.691	.001

Significant level: $p < .005$

With respect to the individual strategies, students reported a greater number of strategies in Task A (16 strategies) compared to Task B (13 strategies). The three strategies which were not employed in Task B consisted of transfer, summarization and imagery. As displayed in the table 3, a wider repertoire of strategies with higher levels of frequency used in Task A than in Task B were found in the use of five metacognitive strategies: planning (M= 2.000, SD= .853), paying attention (M= 3.667, SD= .985), self-monitoring (M= 4.083, SD= .793), self-management (M= 1.083, SD= .900), and problem identification (M= 3.583, SD= 1.379); and eight cognitive strategies: inferencing (M= 2.250, SD= 1.288), substitution (M= .833, SD= 1.030), translation

(M= .667, SD= .778), note-taking (M= 1.167, SD= 1.586), grouping (M= 1.000, SD= .603), transfer (M= .667, SD= .985), summarization (M= .833, SD= .577) and imagery (M= .583, SD= .515). On the other hand, the students only had the higher mean values for one cognitive strategy i.e., 'elaboration' (M= 2.750, SD= 1.155) and one social/affective strategy i.e., 'questioning for clarification' (M= .083, SD= .289) in Task B. Based on these, it can be inferred that the task type has positive effects on learners' strategy use – in other words, "strategy use is highly task –dependent" [7, p.144].

Despite the overall significant difference in the use of LCS between Tasks A and B, only several individual LCS were significantly different ($p < .005$) such as planning ($p = .000$), paying attention ($p = .028$), problem identification ($p = .000$), inferencing ($p = .017$), grouping ($p = .001$), summarization ($p = .000$), and imagery ($p = .002$).

These results highly support those of [3], [7], [18], suggesting that students should be aware of different tasks that call for different strategies, or "no single strategy will be appropriate for all learners for all tasks" [24, p. 266], and specific strategies would be selected in line with their listening task types. In addition, strategies that are used for different listening comprehension tasks seem to be of primary importance and should become the instructional focus of strategy teaching [7]. More importantly, the results indicated that task types exerted significant impacts on the students' use of LCS.

4. Conclusion and Implication

In conclusion, the study aimed to investigate the LCS used by EFL learners at a university in Vietnam. The think-aloud method was employed as a major source of data. The findings indicated that the students employed 16 individual strategies under the three groups: metacognitive, cognitive and social/affective. In addition, more strategies with higher levels of frequency were favoured by the female listeners than their male peers. Despite no significant difference in the use of strategy categories for the female and male listeners, the three individual strategies were found significantly different like paying attention, self-management and questioning for clarification. Finally, metacognitive and cognitive strategies were the most salient to numerous listeners when performing the LC tasks, and there was a statistically significant difference in the students' LCS use across various task types, which unveiled that the students' use of listening comprehension strategies was, to great extent, attributed to some factors such as gender and task type.

Despite certain limitations concerning the only instrument of data collection and a small number of participants, the findings of the study have yielded insights into how the EFL students approach their listening comprehension and suggested implications for LCS instruction in language classes. Specially, CALLA (Cognitive Academic Language Learning Approach) model, a five-phase recursive cycle for introducing, teaching, practicing, evaluating and applying learning strategies is well recommended to weave listening strategies instruction explicitly and directly [29], [30]. By applying this model, students can take their greater responsibility for selecting and employing learning strategies appropriately on specific tasks to enhance their listening comprehension [29].

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