

INSIGHTS INTO EFL LEARNERS' USE OF LISTENING STRATEGIES FOR THE NEW TOEIC TEST FORMAT

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ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
Received: 11/11/2022 Revised: 06/12/2022 Published: 06/12/2022	It is evident that listening comprehension is a vital skill in the process of language learning and plays a crucial role in communication, despite the fact that it is a strenuous activity requiring both background information and linguistic comprehension. Therefore, EFL learners should adopt listening strategies to facilitate the testing process. This study aimed to examine if the EFL learners at MCB English center used English listening strategies and then explore the frequency of the students' use of these strategies. This mixed-methods employed qualitative and quantitative approaches to collect data via closed-ended questionnaires and semi-structured interviews with the participation of 221 respondents and 25 interviewees, respectively. Descriptive statistics and content analysis were used for data analysis. The findings showed that a substantial proportion of the participants employed listening strategies at different levels of frequency, which were classified into three main groups, namely very high use (e.g. memory, cognitive and compensation strategies), high use (e.g. metacognitive strategies) and moderate use (e.g. affective strategies).
KEYWORDS	
EFL	
Listening strategies	
Mixed methods design	
Test-taking strategies	
TOEIC	

TÌM HIỂU VIỆC SỬ DỤNG CHIẾN LƯỢC NGHE CHO BÀI THI TOEIC ĐỊNH DẠNG MỚI CỦA NGƯỜI HỌC TIẾNG ANH NHƯ NGOẠI NGỮ

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THÔNG TIN BÀI BÁO	TÓM TẮT
Ngày nhận bài: 11/11/2022 Ngày hoàn thiện: 06/12/2022 Ngày đăng: 06/12/2022	Nghe hiểu là một kỹ năng quan trọng trong quá trình học ngôn ngữ và đóng một vai trò quan trọng trong giao tiếp, mặc dù thực tế rằng đây là một hoạt động khó đòi hỏi người học cần có cả thông tin cơ bản và hiểu ngôn ngữ. Do đó, người học nên áp dụng các chiến lược nghe để tạo điều kiện thuận lợi trong quá trình làm bài thi và kiểm tra. Nghiên cứu này nhằm mục đích kiểm tra xem sinh viên không chuyên tại trung tâm Anh ngữ MCB có sử dụng các chiến lược nghe tiếng Anh hay không và tìm hiểu tần suất sử dụng các chiến lược này của học viên. Nghiên cứu này được thực hiện theo phương pháp kết hợp cả dữ liệu định tính và định lượng, kết quả được thu thập thông qua bảng câu hỏi và phỏng vấn với sự tham gia của 230 sinh viên và 25 sinh viên khác được phỏng vấn. Thống kê mô tả và phân tích nội dung đã được sử dụng để phân tích dữ liệu. Theo kết quả của nghiên cứu, một tỷ lệ đáng kể những người tham gia đã sử dụng các chiến lược nghe ở các mức tần suất khác nhau, được chia thành ba nhóm chính, cụ thể là sử dụng rất cao (ví dụ: chiến lược ghi nhớ, nhận thức và bù đắp), sử dụng nhiều (ví dụ: chiến lược siêu nhận thức) và sử dụng vừa phải (ví dụ: chiến lược cảm xúc).
TỪ KHÓA	
Tiếng Anh như ngoại ngữ	
Chiến lược nghe	
Chiến lược bài thi nghe	
Nghiên cứu tổng hợp	
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1. Introduction

The TOEIC (Test of English for International Communication) has been used more frequently in educational institutions and workplaces worldwide according to [1]. It captivated more and more people with the TOEIC-oriented English learning courses, which fulfil one of the graduation requirements. Most recently, Nguyen and Gu [2] portray that to meet the immediate needs of test-takers who want high scores on the TOEIC test, many universities in Vietnam have recently added TOEIC classes into their English curricula. As a result, numerous universities offer English courses based on test-takers' TOEIC test scores. Also, enterprises and headhunters claim TOEIC scores can be considered when hiring new employees.

Although Tella, Indoshi, and Othuon [3] point out that the test-takers performance and results in language acquisition may be worsened if the test-takers have negative attitudes and ineffective strategies, testing performance can be improved and facilitated when test-takers have positive attitudes and appropriate test-taking strategies, followed by [4, p.243]. Meanwhile, test-taking strategies represent the consciously selected processes the respondents used to handle language issues, and the item response demands in the test-taking tasks [5, p.308]. Therefore, it is evident that test-takers with positive attitudes and good test-taking strategies toward tests related to their lives acquire knowledge and use it to solve the TOEIC test more effectively. One of the effective ways to foster test takers' ability to develop knowledge and skills in their testing process is based on numerous factors. Additionally, Ramli, Muljono and Afendi [6, p.41] also indicate that primary factors contributing to test-takers testing achievement are internal and external ones, including the test-takers themselves, supporting facilities, and the applied learning model. Various universities, foreign language schools, and foreign language centers include TOEIC in their programs to satisfy the needs of businesses and learners. The completion of these courses allows test-takers to graduate and apply for jobs. Test-taking skills are necessary for test-takers to succeed in these programs' teaching and learning which was noticeably depicted by [7, p.109]. Another aspect worth mentioning in the research is the MCB English center which is an English Center in the Go Vap district; its name MCB refers to individuals with "an insufficient English background" with a very elementary level. Importantly, EFL learners at the MCB English center still face snags in the TOEIC course, especially regarding testing procedures. Additionally, limited studies investigate how EFL students use listening strategies in the TOEIC tests. This study was conducted to bridge this potential gap with the expectation that these findings will enlighten educators and curriculum developers on the worth and necessity, promotion, evaluation, and significance of test-taking methods in and throughout testing environments. There is an urgent need to investigate the students' listening skills in the context of this study to help them better manage TOEIC examinations over such a lengthy period. This study endeavors to answer the following question: To what extent are the test-taking strategies for the new TOEIC test format utilized by EFL learners in the context of the MCB English Center? Are there any significant differences in using the types of test-taking strategies for the new TOEIC test format in terms of EFL learners' language proficiency? If yes. How?

2. Research methodology

2.1. Research site and participants

The research site of this study is the MCB English center in Ho Chi Minh City. The philosophy of the MCB center is based on the idea that students should be at the heart of their education. The center has six staff members for the 2021-2022 academic year, with almost 300 students divided into two levels. The center's professional quality has been strengthened and stabilized thanks to the efforts of the staff and students, and it's placed in a great spot near the IUH campus.

The sample consisted of five critical factors in the participants' general information: year, university, gender, class level and time for learning English per day. Most test-takers come from

Industrial University Ho Chi Minh City; the number of students at Industrial University of Ho Chi Minh City accounted for 93.2% (206 students). Meanwhile, students studying at Van Lang University are small numbers, with 11 students (5.0%), and an inconsiderable proportion is Open University with four students (1.8%). The following sections cover this broad information in further detail: The sample consisted of 221 students from 4 academic years. Among them, three students (1.4%) were first-year students, 20 students (9.0%) were sophomores, 66 students (29.9%) were junior students, and 132 students (59.7%) were senior students. One hundred eighteen students (53.4%) assume their English proficiency at the elementary level with TOEIC scores ranging from 0-350, and 103 students (46.6%) assume their English proficiency at an intermediate level with TOEIC scores ranging from 355-650.

2.2. Research instrument

This study employed the closed-ended questionnaire and interview to collect data. The questionnaire, partly adapted from the studies by [8] and [9], consists of two parts. The first part inquires about the participants' personal information. The second part includes 23 items seeking to find participants' listening strategies used in 5 sub-strategies of memory strategies, cognitive strategies, compensation strategies, metacognitive strategies, and affective strategies. Cronbach's Alpha α of the questionnaire was at **.815**, so the reliability of the questionnaire was very high. Furthermore, the interview consisting of 6 open-ended questions was used to collect qualitative data to gain a deeper understanding of the participants' perceptions and to support quantitative data collected from the questionnaire to investigate the use of the five categories mentioned above of listening strategies.

2.3. Procedures for data collection and analysis

The questionnaire was piloted with 20 students who were not involved in the study. Regarding data collection, the questionnaire was created on Google Forms, and then a link to the Google Form was sent to 230 students in seven classes. The questionnaire took around 30 minutes to complete, but in the end, 221 of the 228 copies returned were legitimate. Twenty-five students volunteered to participate in the semi-structured interview a week after the questionnaire was distributed. Interviews were conducted to obtain more about the listening strategies used during the testing procedure. Additionally, audio recordings were used to transcribe later and analyze the comments of the interviews. Concerning data analysis, SPSS software was used to analyze the quantitative data. Mean (M), standard deviation (SD), and frequency were calculated. The meaning of the means (M) scores for students' use of listening strategies were interpreted as follows: Based on the calculated interval coefficient for four intervals in five points (5-1=4), intervals with the range of 0.80 (4/5) were arranged. The following criteria in the Likert type scale were used to interpret the data: not at all true /very low (M=1.00-1.80); rarely true /low (M=1.81- 2.60); sometimes true /moderate (M=2.61-3.40); often true/high (M=3.41- 4.20); always true/very high (M=4.21-5.00). For the purpose of assessing the information gathered from the interviews, "content analysis" was used. The interviewees were coded as S1, S2, S3,... and S25, and the interview questions were coded as IQ1, IQ2, IQ3, ..., and IQ6.

3. Results and discussion

3.1. Results

Concerning the differences in using listening test-taking strategies, as can be observed in Table 1, the frequency of using these strategies was relatively high (M=4.13; SD=0.40), which reveals that test-takers used listening test-taking strategies rather frequently.

As seen in Table 1, five strategies are listed, including memory, cognitive, compensation, metacognitive, and affective strategies. The frequency of using test-taking strategies among EFL learners was relatively frequent (M=4.13; SD=.40). Flexible use of memory strategies was

determined as the most frequently used strategy by EFL learners (item 1: $M=4.59$; $SD=.26$), followed by compensation strategies (item 3: $M=4.30$; $SD=.39$), cognitive strategies (item 2: $M=4.25$; $SD=.40$), and metacognitive strategies (item 4: $M=4.14$; $SD=.52$). The least frequently used strategies that EFL learners applied were affective (item 5: $M=3.35$; $SD=.44$). In brief, EFL learners usually adopted flexible strategies when they did a project.

Table 1. Test-taking strategies for TOEIC Listening Comprehension in terms of EFL learners' language proficiency

No.	Test-taking strategies for TOEIC Listening Comprehension	N = 221		
		Mean	SD	Extent/Level
1	Memory listening strategies	4.59	.26	very high
2	Cognitive listening strategies	4.25	.40	very high
3	Compensation listening strategies	4.30	.39	very high
4	Metacognitive listening strategies	4.14	.52	high
5	Affective listening strategies	3.35	.44	moderate
Overall	Using test-taking strategies for TOEIC Listening Comprehension	4.13	.40	high

More specifically, regarding the category of “**memory listening strategies**”, among six strategies related to memory strategies, the results present that participants always “remember the keywords or expressions to imagine the context in the TOEIC listening test” (item 2 with $M=4.63$ and $SD=.50$). They always “answer questions by remembering the spoken text's keywords” (item 6 with $M=4.63$ and $SD=.53$), also they “remember the sequence of the TOEIC spoken texts to answer the questions (item 1 with $M=4.48$ and $SD=.54$) with a high frequency. Moreover, the participants also used three other strategies at a very high level. More specifically, they always “associate words with groups in mind to remember what speakers are taking” (item 3 with $M=4.62$ and $SD=.56$), “[associate] the sound of words with pictures in my mind to help [them] remember the spoken text” (item 5 with $M=4.59$ and $SD=.57$), and “link the words or expressions to remember the context of the TOEIC tests” (item 4) with $M=4.58$ and $SD=.57$. Qualitatively, eighteen out of all the twenty-five participating interviewees (72%) reported that they often used memory strategies for their listening test in Q2. Particularly, eighteen students stated that they associate words with groups and the sound of words with pictures while listening to restore needed information. It enabled them to comprehend and remember the keywords or expressions, the sequence, and the listening text content more effectively. However, the other seven students (28%) pointed out their infrequent use of this strategy. For instance, several students shared, (S17) stated: “*I could do parts one and two very well, but in part 3 and part 4, I couldn't follow the speed of the speaker, so I tried to remember keywords and pictures at the end of part 3, and part 4.*” (S17) or (S19) expressed: “*I tried to remember all keywords in 4 choices to do part 3 and part 4, I saw that with the speed of Part 3 we could base on the sequence of man and woman voice, but in part 4 we could base on the sequence of contents. However, it was extremely challenging for me to utilize it.*” (S19)

In terms of the category of “**cognitive strategies**”, five strategies related was employed by most students also at a very high level, among five strategies related to cognitive strategies, respondents always “use my previous knowledge to interpret the TOEIC listening test” (Item 7, $M=4.34$, $SD=.68$), and they also always “use Vietnamese to understand the contexts of the TOEIC listening test” (Item 9, $M=4.23$, $SD=.64$). In addition, in term of main idea, participants usually “grasp the main idea while listening” (Item 10, $M=4.24$, $SD=.63$), and they “listen for the main idea before focusing on other minor details in doing the TOEIC listening test” (Item 11, $M=4.22$, $SD=.70$). Simultaneously, the other strategy was also utilized at a very high level “guess contexts to understand the TOEIC listening test” (item 8, $M=4.24$, $SD=.60$). When it comes to qualitative data collected from the interviews, responses of Q3 showed that all the students interviewed contended that they often favored using cognitive strategies in their listening tests. Thirteen out of all the twenty-five participating interviewees (52%) reported that they often grasped the main idea before focusing on supporting ideas or details. For example, S9 shared:

"Among the five strategies, I believed cognitive strategies are the second vital test-taking strategy because the main ideas helped me a lot when listening." (S9). Nine interviewed participants (36%) intentionally used previous knowledge and translated English to Vietnamese to understand what they heard better. In addition, guessed contexts of what they heard to increase their retention were practically preferred by three informants (12%). For example, S1 highlighted that *"I translated questions in Part 3 and part 4 into Vietnamese and translated what speaking taking into Vietnamese in my mind"*. (S1). In general, all the interviewees highly appreciated cognitive strategies which facilitated their comprehension of the listening texts; for example, S3 expressed: *"It was significant for me. Therefore, cognitive strategies were my choice for the most important strategy, some passages in part 3, I could guess based on what I knew in my real life to answer; it was very effective."* (S3).

Concerning the category of "**compensation strategies**", four strategies related to this category were used at a very high frequency, among four strategies related to compensation strategies, in term of synonyms; the participants always "use the synonyms to answer the TOEIC listening questions" (Item 15, $M = 4.21$, $SD = .72$), besides they also always use these strategies to understand the spoken text to answer the TOEIC listening questions (Item 14, $M = 4.32$, $SD = .68$). Concurrently, the respondents usually "use [their] background knowledge of the topics to guess what the speaker is talking about" (Item 12) with $M = 4.26$, $SD = .64$ and they highly "use linguistic clues (e.g., vocabulary, grammar) to answer the TOEIC listening questions" (Item 13) with $M = 4.42$ and $SD = .61$, showing that the students used this strategy at a very high level. Along the same line, many participants utilized cognitive strategies more frequently during their listening tests in Q4. Seventeen interviewees (68%) proclaimed that they often exploited compensation strategies while listening. Sixteen students (64%) frequently used background knowledge of the topics to guess what the speaker was talking about. S16 shared: *"yes, there were some difficult questions in part 4, especially the last six questions. I always used my background knowledge and context to guess the answer because the graphics contained some confusing details. Sometimes I couldn't find the answer, so background knowledge was beneficial"* (S16). Moreover, fifteen students (60%) also showed the importance of guessing the answer or the meaning of unfamiliar words they had heard using linguistic clues (e.g., word order and word stress). For example, S19 emphasized: *"I used all four strategies very often, especially linguistic clues helped me a lot to answer more effectively in sections 2,3,4 because I could guess the question types to choose the answer more logically."* (S19).

With respect to the category of "**metacognitive strategies**", there are five strategies related to this category. Almost was used at a high level; they "[focus] on what is being listened" (item 16) with $M = 4.22$ and $SD = .71$; before listening for the test, [they] always read questions to guess what is going to be heard" (item 18) with $M = 4.18$ and $SD = .7$, also they always "[Imagine] listening information to understand it better" (item 20) with $M = 2.27$ and $SD = .72$, showing that the students used this strategy at a very high level. Likewise, the other two strategies were used at a high level in terms of keywords and synonyms aspects; the participants usually "listen to the test's keywords to determine the correct answers" (item 17) with $M = 4.17$ and $SD = .77$, they also usually "use synonyms to determine the answers" (item 19) with $M = 3.75$ and $SD = .74$. The interview results showed that twenty-three out of the twenty-five student interviewees (92%) often employed metacognitive strategies for their listening tests. Remarkably, all ten students (40%) usually focused on what they were listening to in the TOEIC tests, such as listening for gist, details, or the speaker's attitudes. Moreover, fifteen of these twenty five students (60%) also reported frequently listening to keywords and synonyms to guess the correct answers. Moreover, in this group, thirteen of these twenty five students (52%) revealed that they usually read questions and visualized information to understand the tests. Generally, almost all these interviewees highly applauded the good impacts of metacognitive strategies on their listening comprehension level. For example, S15 highlighted that metacognitive strategies helped manage

listening behaviours. *"I must image the listening context and what I was listening to understand the whole conversation and talks."* (S15). In contrast, the interview results also indicated that two interviewees (8%) did not frequently employ metacognitive strategies during their listening. For example, S20 stated: *"I chose randomly, I rarely used metacognition. I couldn't self-monitor and self-evaluate while listening. I just listened. I couldn't check and analyze my listening."* (S20)

Finally, the category of "**affective strategies**" contains three strategies. The strategy was used at a moderate level. Notably, the participants usually "encourage [themselves] before/while doing TOEIC listening tasks." (Item 21, $M=3.47$, $SD=.74$). However, the other two strategies were used at a moderate level. More specifically, they often "[keep] calm before and during the test" (item 22) with $M=3.30$ and $SD=.66$ and "approach the listening examination with confidence" (item 23) with $M=3.26$ and $SD=.71$. Based on the interview results, all twenty-three student interviewees (92%) reported that they often breathed deeply, self-relaxed and self-encouraged before listening. These students revealed that this affective strategy could help them reduce pressure and enhance their concentration level for their coming listening tests. Their examples are as follows: *"It was important to apply different strategies for my tests, and affective strategies were my selection because it helped me stay calm for my tests."* (S25). Similarly, S23 indicated: *"In my opinion, affective strategies were important because it helped me confident to do my tests when I could choose suitable strategies."* (S23).

3.2. Discussion

In this section, the study results were discussed to clarify the research questions raised in the literature. Based on the analyzed data from the research questionnaire and semi-structured interview, the results of this study revealed that EFL learners in the context of MCB English Center used listening strategies at a high level towards test-taking strategies in components of listening strategies, which consisted of memory, cognitive, compensation, metacognitive and affective strategies. The previous research partially supports this result of the current study carried out by [10] and [11]. Significantly, these two main group strategies are in [8] research. Moreover, the results align with some conclusions of the recent research by [9], which revealed that students who evaluate memory strategies are the best in the domain of testing outcomes and the lowest in affective strategies stated [12].

More specifically, concerning "**memory listening strategies**", the study's findings revealed that EFL learners in the context of MCB English Center showed their agreement with grouping information while listening to restore. It enabled them to comprehend and remember the listening text content more effectively, and as a result, they paid close attention to keeping, restoring, remembering, and comprehending the heard information. The findings on the test-taking strategies had the same opinion as those [13], who agreed that test-taking strategies significantly contribute to listeners' good listening comprehension ability as they help restore and retrieve the heard information. This result validates the conclusion of prior research conducted by [14], finding that the memory strategy group was the most preferred compared to the other strategy groups. As described in the previous section, most EFL students at MCB English Center lacked substantial prior knowledge of this dilemma.

Concerning "**cognitive listening strategies**", EFL learners in the context of MCB English Center revealed that they tried to grasp the main ideas of the listening texts before focusing on other details or supporting ideas. The participants probably recognized that they engaged more in an active testing environment and cognitive strategies helped them to improve their confidence, helpfulness, responsibilities, and interests in doing the tests. The findings are compatible with the study from [15]. It was concluded that cognitive strategies play an integral role in enhancing learners' knowledge and understanding of the linguistic system (e.g., grammar and structures), enabling students to develop strategic and flexible thinking skills. This result is comparable to [16] conclusion that cognitive strategies are superior to metacognitive and affective ones.

In terms of “**compensation listening strategies**”, EFL learners in the context of MCB English Center expressed positive responses towards project implementation in the making up for the missing knowledge using compensation mechanisms. Learners could infer the meaning of unfamiliar words and idioms or take responsibility for their own time and effort to fixate on the success of language learning as [17] stated in his research. Therefore, compensating tactics are a tool for intelligent guessing since individuals can estimate the meaning of words or pieces of information by employing cues without listening to every syllable. EFL learners in the context of MCB English Center believed that they became more self-regulated for their tests using linguistic clues, including word order and word stress which could help listeners understand unfamiliar words.

Regarding “**metacognitive listening strategies**”, it was explored that EFL learners in the MCB English Center frequently set clear listening goals and decided on what to focus on or ignore. It may be explained by the fact that these strategies supported them in managing the listening process and directing their listening behaviours. The finding in selecting an appropriate and effective strategy for each project in this study was in line with the [18] perspectives, which involves planning, monitoring, and assessing learning or testing in the activity's accomplishment. Additionally, most of the EFL learners in the context of MCB English Center often set up clear goals such as listening for main ideas, listening for detail ideas, or listening for identifying speakers' attitudes, which was supported by the very high mean, which partially confirmed [11] findings in her previous research.

Finally, concerning “**affective listening strategies**”, the study's findings showed that the EFL learners in the MCB English Center don't frequently utilize this strategy when they implement tests. This research results in consent with the viewpoints in [12] research. These are also related to test-takers emotional augmentation, such as perseverance and confidence, and assist students in actively engaging in the learning or testing process in the same line [17]. Therefore, one of the possible explanations for this is that the EFL learners in the context of MCB English Center might focus too much on the contents of the test under the pressure of time-constraint.

4. Conclusion

The study has shown that high school EFL students recognized that listening strategies positively enhanced their listening skills and could improve their listening test scores. Based on such findings, some pedagogical implications are recommended. Firstly, EFL teachers should design activities that allow learners to perform and evaluate their test success. When teaching students how to employ test-taking strategies, teachers should demonstrate which strategies are most effective and give enough opportunity for them to put those strategies into action in the classroom. Moreover, EFL teachers should be dynamic and creative in teaching and guiding processes to trigger students' eagerness and interests. Secondly, EFL students who understand the value of test-taking strategies are more likely to employ them to improve their testing outcomes, and instructors who understand their students' attitudes about testing strategies are more likely to create methods to help their students succeed academically. By discussing with students about the various types of testing strategies and when to use them in their tests, teachers can help students develop self-regulated learning and personalized testing methods. Thirdly, it is advised that administrators should facilitate and support the implementation of seeking ways to incorporate test-taking strategies education into their courses. It is possible to establish high-level self-regulation by cultivating conscious teachers and students, positively impacting students' academic performance, success, and outcomes.

This study still has some limitations. The first limitation is the small sample size, as this study only involved students from the English center. The second limitation is the research instrument. Although the study used a mixed method: quantitative and qualitative, with two instruments, including a questionnaire and a semi-structured interview, it would be better if the researcher used a pre-test and post-test to compare the study results. Another limitation is the research focus

(only listening skills). Therefore, further studies can be conducted with an enormous scope of sample, instrument and research focus so that the findings will be generalized and suggest meaningful pedagogical implications for English language teaching and learning.

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