LISTENING STRATEGIES USED BY LOW-PROFICIENCY LEARNERS
IN QUESTION AND RESPONSE TASKS

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to examine the listening strategies employed by low-proficiency learners while performing mock TOEIC listening tests and to identify the strategies they used for the test questions. A total of 10 participants out of 42 were chosen for stimulated recall protocol interviews. Verbal reports from each participant were categorized using a taxonomy, and each strategy employed by participants was classified according to the type of listening task. Results from the stimulated recall protocol interviews indicated that participants utilized strategies such as identification of words or chunks, match lexis heard with lexis in the question, monitoring against the question and hypothesis formation to derive answers during the question and response task. The frequency and efficacy of the strategies employed to assist them in reaching their answers were markedly different. Learners with limited language proficiency faced difficulties in employing listening strategies to solve listening problems.

Keywords: Listening strategies, Metacognitive and Cognitive Strategies, Task Types, EFL Learners.

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INTRODUCTION

Listening in a foreign language is a complex and demanding skill because learners must process real-time speech using both linguistic and non-linguistic knowledge (Vandergrift & Goh, 2012, p. 152). The nature of spoken input, coupled with features like connected speech (e.g., weak forms, contractions, elision, and assimilation), often presents significant challenges, particularly for learners with low language proficiency (Harmer, 2001, pp. 336-357; Renandya & Farrell, 2011, pp. 52-59). These difficulties are further explained by the fact that learners typically have only one opportunity to hear the recording, leaving no chance for repetition or clarification. As such, they must rely on their listening abilities to decode, process, and respond to real-time prompts (Trew, 2007; IIMURA, 2018, pp. 65-81).

Listening becomes even more challenging in standardized test settings, such as the Test of English for International Communication (TOEIC), International English Language Testing System (IELTS), and Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL). Each test requires unique cognitive demands on learners, requiring them to navigate varied task types and process audio material at a rapid pace (Buck, 2003, p. 151; Taladngoen & Esteban, 2022, pp. 802-829). In the TOEIC listening section, for instance, learners must complete four task types: photograph, question and response, short conversation, and short talk. The question and response task, the focus of this study, is particularly demanding because learners hear the question and responses only once, with no textual support provided in the test book (Educational Testing Service, 2022). To succeed, learners need advanced phonological and morphological knowledge, such as the ability to recognize sound patterns, assimilations, and deletions, as well as a wide vocabulary base to interpret the given options (Taladngoen & Esteban, 2022, pp. 802-829).

Despite the significance of listening in both language learning and testing contexts, research on listening comprehension and instruction remains limited, particularly in the realm of testing. Studies like Goh (1998, pp. 55-79); Vandergrift and Goh (2012, p. 152) have shown that high-proficiency learners employ both cognitive and metacognitive strategies such as prediction, elaboration, world knowledge elaboration, inferencing, summarization and selective attention to overcome listening challenges in academic settings. Research by Graham, Santos and Vanderplank (2008, pp. 52-68) highlighted differences in strategy use between learners of varying proficiency levels. For example, top linguistic knowledge learners often integrate prediction with metacognitive strategies, whereas low-proficiency learners may default to less effective compensatory strategies. Low-proficiency learners often encounter challenges in listening

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comprehension tasks due to limited linguistic and cognitive constraints (Field, 2009, pp. 12-16). Many learners rely on bottom-up strategies, focusing on decoding individual sounds, words and grammatical structures to construct the meaning (Field, 2009, pp. 12-16). Vandergrift (2004, pp. 3-25) also supported the idea that learners who relied on identifying individual words and chunks could reflect on bottom-up processing, where attention was directed toward decoding individual words. Goh (2008, pp. 188-213) concluded that low-proficiency learners often employ guessing when comprehension is incomplete. As an implication for language instructors, the learners should be trained on the meaning from the context rather than lexical matches. Paraphrasing and synonym recognition can help them identify correct answer rather than matching lexis heard to lexis in the question (Vandergrift & Goh, 2012, p. 37). In testing contexts, listening strategy research is even limited. Pan (2015, pp. 45-77) investigated listening strategies employed by Taiwanese university students during the TOEIC and found that strategy use varied by task type and proficiency level. For instance, planning strategies were used more frequently in photograph tasks compared to short talks or question and response tasks. Similarly, learners with higher proficiency exhibited greater flexibility and effectiveness in their strategy use.

The limitation of the research in this area can be attributed to methodological difficulties in capturing the cognitive processes of learners during listening tasks (Yi'an, 1998, pp. 21-44) and the reliance on indirect measures to study such complex phenomena (Rubin, 1994, pp. 199-221). However, understanding and teaching listening strategies is critical for both language acquisition and test preparation. Teachers should not only introduce listening strategies, but also train learners in appropriate different task types (Rost, 2011, p. 151). For example, learners must understand how to predict, monitor, and evaluate their responses effectively to improve listening performance. Task-based listening activities that involve problem-solving or decision making can encourage learners to integrate multiple strategies (Field, 2008, p. 286). This study focuses on the question and response task in the mock TOEIC listening test. Unlike other tasks, such as short talks and conversations where learners can preview the content, the question and response task provide no textual support. This unique format necessitates the strategic use of listening skills. The study aims to investigate the listening strategies employed by EFL low proficiency learners. The findings will provide insights for instructors on how to teach listening strategies effectively and help learners prepare for high-stakes standardized tests, such as exit exams or job application tests.

RESEARCH QUESTION

What listening strategies do low level of proficiency learners use when completing the question and response task in the mock TOEIC listening test?

METHOD

The current study utilized a qualitative approach to investigate the listening strategies employed in the question and response task of the mock TOEIC listening test.

Participants

The scores of the TOEIC listening mock test were used to categorize 131 participants into high, intermediate, and low proficiency levels. High-proficiency learners were defined as those with scores between 60 and 90, intermediate learners as those with scores between 40 and 59, and low-proficiency learners as those with scores between 20 and 39. The purposive sampling method was then implemented to identify 10 out of 42 participants from the low-proficiency group who obtained the highest scores in the metacognitive and cognitive strategies questions for the stimulated recall protocol interviews. The study was conducted at a private university in Thailand, involving third-year students enrolled in a Listening and Speaking course and Preparation for English Proficiency Test Course. The participants included both English major and non-English major students with varying levels of exposure to English courses. For instance, non-English major students typically completed three to four English courses, whereas English majors completed more than five courses.

Research Instruments

Stimulated Recall Protocol Interview Prior to the stimulated recall interviews, participants received instructions from their teacher on how to do the verbal report. The teacher demonstrated the procedure by showing a video and guiding participants to verbalize their thoughts in response to stimuli such as listening prompts, questions, or answer choices. Participants were instructed to pause the recording before articulating their thoughts aloud. The teacher was not allowed to ask the students leading questions. If the students remain silent, the teacher may ask follow-up questions or play another audio file for them.

Procedures

After completing the interviews, the researcher transcribed the responses using Microsoft Word. To ensure the reliability of the analysis, the researcher and a listening expert coded the data using metacognitive and cognitive taxonomy frameworks from previous studies (Graham,

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Santos & Vanderplank, 2008, pp. 52-68; Simasangyaporn, 2016; Young, 1996). The coding process involved breaking the responses into smaller chunks, with the researcher annotating strategies using the comment feature in Microsoft Word. Once the transcription and coding were completed, the blank transcription was sent to an inter-rater for reliability verification. Finally, the researcher created a strategy grid in Microsoft Excel to systematically analyze the strategies employed by participants in each section of the listening test.

RESULTS

According to the analysis of the listening test in the question and response task, the strategies that participants employed were identification of words and chunks, match lexis heard to lexis in the question, monitoring against the question, and hypothesis formation.

Identification of Words and Chunks

PL21, a low-proficiency learner who demonstrated that she could identify words and chunks from the question. However, the words she identified were not useful to answer the question.

Question 37: Is there a discount on this furniture?

(a) Yes, I can give you twenty-five percent off the regular price.

(b) Yes, we counted it last night.

(c) Yes, this is furniture.

PL21

"The answer is C because the question asks about 'furniture' or something, and I hear 'this is furniture.' For me, A is incorrect because the speaker says something about 25% off, and choice B has the word 'last night,' so I don't choose choices A and B, but C. I will choose choice C because it has the same word as in the question."

PL21 was able to identify the last word in the question, which was "furniture." From the responses, she identified "25% off" and "last night." Then, she formed the hypothesis that the correct answer was choice C without comprehending the meaning of the choices. She immediately eliminated the correct answer and matched the lexis heard in the question with the lexis in the choice that could lead to an incorrect answer. PL9, another low-proficiency learner who could identify words and chunks from the question. However, the word and chuck

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she heard was just the word she heard at the end of the sentence that she could catch up and chose as the answer. Unfortunately, the word heard was not useful or helpful in answering the question.

Question 19: Do you know what time the offices close?

(a) I think everyone leaves by 5.30.

(b) Yes, the offices are closed.

(c) You really should buy some new clothes.

PL9

"The answer is B. The question asked what time the office closes something like that and choice B answer is "yes I think I know what time it is closed", so I choose choice B and I delete choice A and C."

PL9 was able to identify the whole sentence and translate the meaning of the sentence into Thai "Do you know what time the office close". Then she formed hypothesis that the correct answer was choice B without comprehending the meaning of choice B and she eliminated choice A and C because she believed that the answer 'Yes' would match with the question begins with 'Do' or she just matched the lexis heard in the question with the lexis in the choice that could lead her to choose incorrect answer.

PL18, low proficiency learner who accidentally chose the same question as PL9. "I think the correct answer is C. You.....I cannot translate the question, but I could hear the same word in choice B and C (closed and clothes) and choice A, there is no word that sound the same as in choice B and C. I change my mind, I think the answer is B not C."

PL18 was able to identify the word 'close' in the question and answer as it could be seen from the report that she heard the same word in choice B and C not A (close and clothes). She then formed hypothesis that the correct answer was choice C. Unfortunately, the lexis heard could match with the answer in choice B, close and choice C, clothes, she suddenly changed her answer from choice C to choice B without any explanation. It was obvious that the ability to hear and comprehend the questions between PL21, PL9 and PL18 could not go beyond the word level in the question and response task. In addition, it could be seen that low level of proficiency learners could not get the right way to arrive at the correct answer to the question.

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Matching Lexis Heard to Lexis in the Question

When participants did not understand what the question was, they matched the words they could hear with the words that appeared in the choices. Learners who did not monitor or comprehend the question ended up selecting the choice with the same word as in the question.

PL19, a low-proficiency participant, demonstrated that she could not monitor and comprehend the question. She just heard the last word in the question and matched it to the choice.

Question 18: Who is going to meet Mr. Contini at the airport?

   (a) He's at the airport.

   (b) Mrs. Garcia will pick him up.

   (c) At ten o'clock.

PL19

"I have heard the word 'airport' because they are at the airport, so I would answer choice A because I have heard the word 'airport.' He is at the airport."

PL19 did not comprehend the question and the choices. She identified the last word in the question ("airport"), which was not important to answer the question. She then matched the last word she heard with the same lexis in the choice.

Next, PL12 employed match lexis heard to lexis in the question strategy without monitoring and understanding the question. She also matched the last word heard in the question with the answer.

Question 13: Where did you put the package for Ms. Sato?

   (a) Ms. Sato is over there.

   (b) They're on her desk.

   (c) She packed her bags.

PL12

"I think the answer is A because I have heard the last word 'Ms. . . .' something, and choice A just repeated the same word as in the question."

PL12 did not monitor or comprehend the question and could only identify the last word ("Ms. Something"). The word she could identify was not useful to make further inferences, so she employed guessing to link the word in the question with the word in the choice.

PL17 used match lexis heard to lexis in the question strategy without comprehending the meaning of the question. Furthermore, she matched the word she heard in the question with the same word in the choice, especially when she could not understand the whole meaning of the question.

Question 20: Why did Ms. Chen call a meeting today?

(a) It's today.

(b) At 2.30, I think.

(c) Because we have to discuss the budget.

PL17

"The question asks when is the time to call, but when I listen to the choice I cannot translate them. Choice A is about 'today', choice B is the other days and the last choice I cannot translate the meaning. But if I have to guess the answer, I think I will choose choice A because I could hear the word 'today' in the question and choice A has the word 'today', so the answer is A."

PL17 employed quite the same strategy as PL19 and PL12. PL17 did not comprehend the question and the choices. What she could do was to identify the last word in the question ("today"), which was not important to answer the question. She then matched the last word she heard with the same lexis in the choice.

In conclusion, learners in low proficiency level should be aware of match lexis heard to lexis in the question strategy because the test was designed to motivate low-proficiency learners to choose a distractor when they were not able to monitor and comprehend the question. If learners matched what they heard without understanding the question, there was a high possibility of their choosing the wrong answer.

Monitoring Against the Question

Participants needed to understand and monitor the question being asked to select the correct answer. They had to rely on the recording because they had nothing to read during the listening. Therefore, if they were not able to monitor and understand the question, they

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would not know what the answer was. Moreover, this strategy could not be used alone. Participants will be successful if they used this strategy in combination with other listening strategies such as identification of words and chunks and hypothesis formation.

PL19, a low proficiency participant, was able to monitor the question using an identified word and without comprehending the question. She used inferencing, elaboration and world knowledge strategies to help her answer the question.

Question 17: It is supposed to rain tomorrow.

(a) You were supposed to come yesterday.

(b) I'd better bring an umbrella.

(c) Tomorrow's train is on time.

PL19

"The question said something about 'rain' and I think it's about to rain, so I will choose choice B because I hear the word 'umbrella.' I should bring an umbrella."

PL19 monitored the question and was able to identify the word 'rain' without understanding the question. She did not form a hypothesis, but she accidentally heard the word 'umbrella'. So she used elaboration and background knowledge strategies to make sense of the question: if it rains, people carry umbrellas

PL9, another low proficiency participant, was able to monitor the question and understand the question asked which was about the number of people. She then used her selective attention together with hypothesis formation and identification of word strategies to arrive at the correct answer.

Question 32: How many people work in this department?

(a) Yes, it's quite a big apartment.

(b) There are fifteen altogether.

(b) I've worked here for several years.

"The answer is B because the question asks about how many people work in this department something like that and in choice B I hear the number 'fifty-four' or 'forty-nine'. I don't choose choice A and C because they do not mention anything about number."

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PL9 demonstrated the ability to monitor the question being asked and formed hypothesis that the answer was in Choice B. By identifying key words in the question, such as "how many" and "department," she inferred that the answer would involve numbers. She employed a selective attention strategy, focusing on the numbers mentioned in the choices. However, although the numbers she heard (54 or 49) did not match the correct answer (15) in Choice B, she still selected it because the other options (A and C) did not relate to numbers.

Hypothesis Formation

Most low-proficiency learners, including PL12, PL17, PL18, PL19 and PL21, employed formation strategy. The examples in bold below demonstrated the usage of hypothesis formation in their listening.

PL12

"**I think the answer is A** because I have heard the last word 'Ms. . . .' something, **and choice A just repeated the same word as in the question.**"

PL17

"The question asks when is the time to call, but when I listen to the choice I cannot translate them. Choice A is about 'today', choice B is the other days and the last choice I cannot translate the meaning. But if I have to guess the answer, **I think I will choose choice A because I could hear the word 'today' in the question and choice A has the word 'today', so the answer is A.**"

PL18

"**I think the correct answer is C. You.....I cannot translate the question, but I could hear the same word in choice B and C (closed and clothes) and choice A**, there is no word that sound the same as in choice B and C. I change my mind, I think the answer is B not C."

PL19

"**I have heard the word 'airport' because they are at the airport, so I would answer choice A** because I have heard the word 'airport.' He is at the airport."

PL21

"**The answer is C because the question asks about 'furniture' or something, and I hear 'this is furniture.'** For me, A is incorrect because the speaker says something about 25% off, and choice B has the word 'last night,' so I don't choose choices A and B, but C. I will choose choice C because it has the same word as in the question."

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It was obvious that all learners with low proficiency level used hypothesis formation during listening tests. This strategy could not be employed alone; it needed combination with several listening strategies, including planning, selective attention, word or chunk identification, hypothesis confirmation, and evaluation. If learners employed hypothesis formation together with other listening skills, they would successfully arrive at the correct answers. This study indicates that low proficiency learners fail to arrive at the right answers due to their hypothesis formation and identification of words and chunk strategy, without understanding the meaning of the questions asked. As a result, hypothesis formation within this group would mostly involve guessing possible answers. Furthermore, employing hypothesis formation strategy together with matching lexis heard from lexis in the questions would stop them from choosing the correct answers, but the distractors.

In conclusion, low-proficiency learners revealed that they applied many strategies, such as monitoring questions, word and chunk identification, elaboration, background knowledge, and hypothesis formation, however with low quality and inappropriateness in their use. Consequently, some learners employed strategies based on partial word recognition and inference, while others combined selective attention and hypothesis formation to comprehend the questions. These findings demonstrate the diverse and adaptive strategies low-proficiency learners use to compensate for limited language proficiency.

DISCUSSION

The strategies that low-proficiency learners used in question and response task in TOEIC listening mock test were identification of words and chunks, match lexis heard to lexis in the question, and monitoring against the question and hypothesis formation strategies. These strategies led to errors due to limited comprehension skills as earlier study on listening challenges faced by L2 leaners (Vandergrift, 2007, pp. 191-210; Field, 2008, p. 48). For example, PL21 identified 'furniture' in the question and '25% off' in the choices but failed to integrate this information into coherent understanding of the question. Similarly, PL9 and PL18 demonstrated difficulties moving beyond the word level resulting in incorrect answers. The finding is related with Rost (2016, p. 146) that low-level of proficiency learners often struggle with top-down processing which involve using context and background knowledge to interpret the meaning. To address this limitation, EFL teachers should focus on integrating top-down and bottom-up strategies in the classroom. Activities such as predicting content based on context and summarizing

main ideas can help learners develop the ability to process the meaning beyond single word meaning (Goh, 2008, pp. 188-213).

Match lexis heard to lexis in the question strategy as used by PL19, PL12 and PL17, highlighted common problems for low proficiency learners. Previous research study from Field (2008, p. 30) showed that distractors in listening tasks are often designed to include words that appear in the question but are irrelevant to the correct answer. For instance, PL19 matched 'airport' in the question with 'airport' in Choice A without considering semantic relationship between question and answer. Similarly, PL12 chose choice A based on the repetition of 'Ms.' From the question, while PL17 selected the choice with repeated word 'today'.

The ability to monitor the question and use inferencing, as demonstrated by some learners, is a critical listening skill. PL19, for instance, identified the word "rain" in the question and inferred that carrying an umbrella (Choice B) was a logical response. Similarly, PL9 monitored the question about the number of people and used selective attention to focus on numbers mentioned in the choices.

These examples illustrate the importance of combining bottom-up processing (e.g., identifying keywords) with top-down strategies such as inferencing and hypothesis formation. Vandergrift (2007, pp. 191-210) emphasized that successful L2 listeners actively engage in hypothesis testing and use contextual clues to verify their interpretations. However, as seen in this study, the learners' monitoring was often incomplete, leading to errors when critical information was missed or misinterpreted. To strengthen monitoring against the question strategy, learners can practice activities that require active listening and real-time synthesis of information.

The findings highlight that low-proficiency learners rely on a narrow range of compensatory strategies, such as word identification and lexical matching, which are insufficient for listening comprehension. These results are consistent with prior research indicating that limited linguistic proficiency often forces learners to adopt strategies that do not facilitate deep understanding (Goh, 2000, pp. 55-75; Vandergrift, 2004, pp. 3-25). To improve listening skills, learners should be guided to develop a balanced approach that combines bottom-up processing (e.g., identifying key words) with top-down strategies (e.g., inferencing and contextual analysis). Structured practice in monitoring, paraphrasing, and hypothesis formation can help learners move beyond word levels and achieve greater success in listening tasks.

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