Metacognitive Awareness in Academic Listening: A Case Study of Jordanian Postgraduate Students

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Abstract

Research has indicated that listening is the least investigated skill in the world literature, and in the Jordanian literature it is not an exception. This can be attributed to the nature of listening as having an unclear product and output from listeners. Consequently, Metacognitive Awareness Listening Questionnaire (MALQ) developed by Vandergrift et al (2006) that assesses listeners’ level of metacognitive awareness was employed to evaluate listeners’ level of comprehension in academic listening activities. This questionnaire consists of 21 items that embody five underlying aspects. Specifically, this study targeted 22 first year postgraduate students of Linguistics at Yarmouk University, Jordan. The quantitative results indicated that the respondents are moderate users of metacognitive strategies. Therefore, the findings have highlighted Jordanian higher education providers of the need of extensive research to improve the comprehension level of academic listening activities involving postgraduate students.

KEYWORDS: ACADEMIC LISTENING, MALQ, METACOGNITIVE AWARENESS, METACOGNITIVE STRATEGIES, POSTGRADUATE STUDENT.

Introduction

Listening is approached in the literature as the most difficult language skill, most obscure, and hence least investigated. Among other reasons, this can be accounted for by the transient nature of the aural texts and the fact that a listener cannot ‘slow the speech down or break it down into manageable chunks’ (Vandergrift & Goh, 2012). Wolfgramm, Suter, & Göksel (2016) add that ‘unlike reading, it requires both hearing and processing information in real-time’. Moreover, listening cannot be approached as hearing which is a subconscious operation (Wolfgramm, Suter, & Göksel, 2016) without effort, attention, or intention to achieve an ultimate objective. In this context also, Hasan (2000) made a distinction between mere listening as a process which might not lead to an interpretation or reaction, and listening comprehension as a process which is supposed to lead to an overall understanding of a text.

In the current literature, there is a need to profoundly investigate how listening goes because ‘our knowledge about listening becomes limited and incoherent when there is a consistent lack of interest in developing and testing listening theory’ (Bodie & Fitch-Hauser, 2010, p. 76). According to them, many researchers have failed to take listening seriously as a distinct entity; rather, they approached it as a dependent language skill. This attitude urges researchers to dedicate more efforts and deeper investigations to arrive at a more effective pedagogy on how listening really goes. According to Goh (1997, p. 368), ‘When students become fully aware of the various aspects of second language listening, they will be well placed to become more autonomous listeners’ who can depend on themselves in processing listening to achieve more successful results.
Academic Listening vs. Communicative Listening

Listening to a second language in an academic environment is said by many researchers to be different from and more difficult than usual or communicative listening. For instance, listening to lectures of a second or foreign language is difficult and daunting for students; they have to simultaneously listen, take notes, participate, and cope with visual materials like textbooks and slides (Selamat & Sidhu, 2011).

According to Wolvin and Coakley (2000), unlike communicative listening, ‘Listening is a critical factor in academic success’; therefore, students should be aware of how to listen successfully to achieve the expected academic goal in their course of academic education. Listeners should also have a target in their mind when they listen because the listening purpose seems to play an important role that can increase or decrease the percentage of the perceived aural text comprehended (Nunan, 1991). He thinks that when a successful listener is interested in the text in question, then he can ‘tune in’ to some utterances and also can ‘exclude’ or miss others as a result of ‘a lack of interest’. This view affirms that a successful listener can indeed control his listening behaviour, the thing that would be positively reflected on their overall academic success.

What makes academic listening inadequacy a crucial issue is the fact that the most common mode of instruction is through lecturing by which students receive the bulk of knowledge (40-50%) through listening (Mendelsohn, 1994, cited in Banat, 2015), which is also necessary to develop one’s L2 language (Goh, 2002). Successful students have to select and extract the relative and key ideas in a lecture. This means that the listening skill is a must-have aptitude for successful listeners; hence, successful learners. However, due to individual differences (like age, gender, anxiety, personality, aptitude, motivation, attitude, beliefs, learning styles and learning strategies) some students cannot achieve the ultimate goal of a lecture through listening (Harputlu & Ceylan, 2014). Ultimately, this means that unless students are competent listeners, they will not be able to grasp what they should grasp; this in turn might affect their overall academic achievement and knowledge (Bodie & Fitch-Hauser, 2010; Bodie, 2011; Goh & Aryadoust, 2016; Selamat & Sidhu, 2011).

Listening itself can be learned to ‘produce desired outcomes’ (Wolvin & Coakley, 2000); especially through explicit explanations by teachers and by showing students how skilled listeners ‘orchestrate’ different kinds of strategies through their listening tasks as Vandergrift (2003) argues. In other words, in order for less skilled students to build an effective listening skill, they should be shown how successful listeners behave in approaching listening tasks to simulate and stimulate the way they listen.

According to Goh (1997), it is very important for learners to know what they know about listening for many reasons: once learners are aware about their learning, then this awareness can directly impact the process and outcome of their learning because at this stage, they will be able to select and apply the most effective strategies in listening and learning in general. Moreover, in this way teachers and researchers can differentiate between good and poor learners and listeners, this in turn helps teachers to apply the most effective strategies on both categories of students. Unsurprisingly, this can have a positive effect reflected on students themselves.

Metacognition

Students of different stages make use of several learning strategies consciously and unconsciously according to the task in question and to other different variables. O’Malley et al. (1990) divided learning strategies into three categories: (a) cognitive (b) socioaffective, and (c) metacognitive strategies; ‘among these, metacognitive strategies are considered as the most essential in developing learners’ skills’ as the authors argue. Anderson (2002) situates metacognition as ‘the main key’ to learning,
which helps students ‘figure out’ what and how to learn. He states that ‘strong metacognitive skills empower second language learners’.

Metacognitive strategies can assist performance and compensate for a kind of missing knowledge as Field (2011) argues. Researchers like Field highlighted the importance of how dependent students are upon such compensatory strategies because this can reflect on the learning environment they are involved in. At the same time, he claims that ‘we know very little about how effectively they use the strategies they are taught – or even how effective the strategies themselves are. However, Field is convinced that such compensatory strategies can really help students and he argued that there is a need to investigate more deeply the way such strategies are employed and the extent to which they are successful.

Metacognition first emerged in the 1970s and adapted from literature on ‘metaprocesses such as metamemory’ (Dinsmore, Alexander & Loughlin, 2008). Metacognition has been widely referred to as ‘thinking about thinking’ (Anderson, 2002), and can be divided into main five subcategories of processes: (1) preparing and planning for learning, (2) selecting and using learning strategies, (3) monitoring strategy use, (4) orchestrating various strategies, and (5) evaluating strategy use and learning’. He goes further to argue that these five groups of processes are not linearly connected and included as a continuum; rather, they can coincide and interact with each other.

Metacognitive strategies therefore are “general skills through which learners manage, direct, regulate, guide their learning, i.e. planning, monitoring and evaluating” (Wenden, 1998). In other words, by Vandergrift & Go (2012, p84), ‘metacognition enables us to be agents of our own thinking’. As van Velzen (2012) argues, metacognitive knowledge can to a high extent facilitate learning because it helps ‘provide students with a tool for analysing new information and situations’.

According to Cross (2010) and Wang (2015) learners have different varying degrees in their metacognition, being different in the level of adequate use of their metacognitive learning strategies. This can be clearly manifested because learners who use their metacognitive abilities tend to be more strategic, more confident, faster in processing knowledge, and more successful in coping with new situations (Wenden, 1998).

Flavell (1979) was the first to use the term metacognition to refer to awareness and beliefs about language learning and the mental processes involved in learning. However, one might wonder about where and when metacognition can take place in the language pedagogy: ‘the prevailing view of metacognition in L2 research, including for listening studies resides within a cognitivist paradigm’ (Cross, 2010), a structure which lies at the heart of language learning and acquisition as Chomsky proposed in the 1960s.

Flavell (1979) identified three kinds of metacognitive knowledge: Person knowledge (PK), Task knowledge (TK), and Strategy knowledge (SK). The first kind (PK) has to do with what learners know about themselves as learners; the second kind (TK) refers to what learners know about the demands and nature of a task in question; the last kind is concerned with what learners know about the more effective strategies in learning.

Once teachers and researchers are aware about these factors, they can build a more comprehensive understanding about the process of learning and how to help solve related problems. In order for them to come to this end and achieve this kind of understanding, they can make students describe what they know about the above three kinds of knowledge especially by verbalizing what goes around in such students’ minds when approaching a learning task.
Research on metacognitive awareness and L2 listening

The reception and perception of a foreign language input seems to be a complex process (Liu & Thondhlana, 2015) in both academic and non-academic settings. This process depends on several factors that can control the amount of knowledge received by a listener. These factors are responsible for the variance in comprehension found when listening to a foreign language. Among those factors is the awareness of metacognitive knowledge applied during listening to a foreign language to reach the maximum level of comprehension.

Unsuccessful listening lead to and also can be caused by lexical and other kinds of gaps which in turn have a strong impact on the global comprehension of a text as (Wolfgramm, Suter, & Göksel, 2016) argues. Therefore, emerges the need to compensate for such gaps in order for listeners to achieve a clearer understanding and achieve the ultimate goal of a listening task. In this context, metacognitive awareness has been recently presented as a variable that indeed makes a difference in the success or otherwise when students are involved in listening tasks. In short, metacognition as Goh (2008) proposed allows listeners to regulate and redirect their thinking processes in listening tasks.

The metacognitive awareness is crucial and indeed has a place in the listening development as Goh & Hu (2014) argue. According to Vandergrift (2012, p82) also ‘metacognition lies at the heart of learner-oriented listening instruction’. Thereby, highlighting the vital role metacognition plays in academic listening tasks.

One key individual difference among students is their learning strategies use; hence, their metacognitive strategies use in learning; this in turn can be reflected on learners’ performance in academic tasks. However, the level of metacognition can be increased by applying a pedagogical task-based program suggested by Vandergrift and Tafaghodtari (2010) which they called the ‘pedagogical cycle’. This plan, they argue, guides learners through the metacognitive processes (prediction/planning, monitoring, evaluating, and problem solving) that lead to successful L2 listening by raising learners’ attention to the metacognitive processes used while listening. They carried out their research on an experimental group consisting of 59 students which underwent the ‘pedagogical cycle’ program over a semester, and avoided a control group consisting of 47 learners taught by the same teacher and listened to the same texts over the same period but without being exposed to the pedagogical cycle guidance. They found that the experimental group significantly outperformed the control group in listening tests, and that the less skilled listeners from the experimental group outperformed the proficient listeners in the control group.

This manifests in a clear-cut way the effectiveness of the metacognitive processes necessary for approaching listening tasks. Along with listening tests administered at the beginning and end of their study, the Metacognitive Awareness Listening Questionnaire (MALQ) was used to monitor the development of participants’ metacognitive awareness, which was administered three times: at the beginning, in the middle, and at the end of the program immediately after a listening task. To further confirm their results, a stimulated recall session on six participants’ MALQ responses was carried out. However, the experimental group’s less skilled listeners showed more progress than their skilled peers. According to Vandergrift and Tafaghodtari, this approach to L2 listening has the ability to make ‘authentic texts more accessible at beginning levels of instruction, thereby making listening learning more relevant and interesting for these learners’.

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Approximately, the same pedagogical plan was replicated in Rahimirad and Shams’s (2014) study on Iranian female university students. In this study, they made use of the MALQ, an IELTS listening test, and a stimulated recall interview to get more details and have more authentic results after an intervention of 5 weeks. Following Vandergrift and Tafaghodtari (2010), they exposed the participants to explicit instruction about the role of metacognition in listening. Their study’s outcomes also indicate that metacognitive strategy instruction can clearly enhance listening performance among learners of English as a FL, and that the level of metacognition itself can be increased if taught properly.

Cross (2010) argues that ‘the explicit verbalisation of strategies as part of a pedagogical cycle afford opportunities to enhance metacognitive awareness of L2 listening’. In this study, he replicated Vandergrift’s (2007) pedagogical cycle applying it on six pairs of Japanese female learners learning English as a FL at an advanced-level; thereby, revealing a different kind of authentic data by excluding less-skilled learners.

Another study by Bozorgian (2014) also could prove the enhancement of metacognitive awareness (planning, monitoring, and evaluation) and thus, the listening ability of participants over eight weeks of instruction, also following Vandergrift’s (2004) pedagogical program.

Metacognitive awareness of L2 listening as measured by the MALQ scale accounted for 13% of the variance found among the participants in Vandergrift et al. (2006); and accounted for 15% in Zeng (2012) as reported in Goh & Hu (2014); and accounted for 20% in Goh & Hu (2014).

Objectives of the study

This study investigated the metacognitive behaviour among Masters’ students of Linguistics at Yarmouk University (in Jordan) when coping with listening tasks in order to increase knowledge about the extent to which they employ such conducts, and to what extent they are conscious about those conducts.

The motivation behind this study is the fact that in the Jordanian context, very few studies have been conducted to investigate the effects of metacognitive strategies use on academic listening proficiency. If this gap is addressed, a deeper understanding of the barriers to a more successful listening ability will be established.

The Present Study

Participants

A total of 22 (male = 5; female = 17) Jordanian Masters’ students of Linguistics participated in this study. All of them are Jordanian and native speakers of Arabic and study English as a foreign language. The students are of both tracks Coursework and Mixed-Mode - joined together at least for the first 3 semesters. All of the participants are involved in the same courses, exposed to the same inputs, and equal in the expected results. Their age ranged between 22 and 33 years. As part of their formal education, all of them have studied English for a minimum of 8 years at school before they completed their Bachelors’ degree in English.

Instrumentation

In the current research, an instrument was applied which is a self-report measure developed by Vandergrift, et al. (2006) and referred to as the Metacognitive Awareness Listening Questionnaire (MALQ), which according to them can assess the extent to which language learners are aware of and
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can manage the process of L2 listening comprehension. It contains 21 items that are rated on a six-point Likert scale (1=strongly disagree- 6=strongly agree). The items are randomly enlisted as shown in Table 1 below. With these versatile measurements, the questionnaire reveals participants’ metacognitive knowledge and perceived use of strategies while listening to oral texts (Goh & Hu, 2014).

Table 1: Distributing Items on Subscales

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subscale Name</th>
<th>Subscale Items</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Problem-Solving (PS)</td>
<td>5, 7, 9, 13, 17, and 19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Planning and Evaluation (PE)</td>
<td>1, 10, 14, 20, and 21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mental Translation (MT)</td>
<td>4, 11, and 18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Person Knowledge (PK)</td>
<td>3, 8, and 15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Directed Attention (DA)</td>
<td>2, 6, 12, and 16</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Data collection and Analysis

All of the participants had experienced on authentic listening task as a part of a language proficiency test administered as a condition for postgraduate studies’ admission. Therefore, such students are supposed to provide more reliable and experimental answers to the survey. The survey was administered while they were attending a regular class at Yarmouk University when asked to volunteer to participate in this study.

The participants were aware of the aim of this study and were assured that their participation is not compulsory and their answers would be confidential.

When a respondent chooses a response indicating ‘strongly agree’, ‘agree’, ‘disagree’, and ‘strongly disagree’ for any strategy, this suggests that he is certain about their use of that strategy. On the other hand, when they choose ‘partially agree’ or ‘partially disagree’, this would indicate a degree of uncertainty.

The Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) was employed to analyse the survey data. The standard deviation for the overall MALQ scale was 0.69 which is very close to the internal consistency reported by Vandergrift et al. (2006) during the validation of the MALQ which means that the results have an acceptable degree of reliability (Goh & Hu, 2014).

Results and Discussion

In this study, the MALQ was used to statistically describe the level of participants’ metacognitive strategies awareness as shown in Table 2 below. It is shown in the table that the participants’ overall level of metacognitive listening strategies awareness is (MS: 4.18) on a six-point scale, which only reflects an average level of metacognitive awareness.

The instrument employed in the study measured the originally intended five underlying subscales: problem-solving (4.84); planning and evaluation (3.88); mental translation (3.66); person knowledge (4.1); and directed attention (4.37) with an overall mean of (4.18).

This research also explored to what extent the participants are aware of the metacognitive strategies that are employed during listening to a foreign language. The outcomes of the study showed that those participants have an overall acceptable level of metacognitive strategy use, and an acceptable level of awareness about metacognitive awareness because the answers and thus the mean scores tend to be
Participants did not show a high level of metacognitive awareness use in approaching the listening skill. This could be accounted for by the absence of explicit metacognitive instruction that can limit their chances to develop such kind of awareness.

The ‘metacognitive strategies assist students in managing their learning more effectively’ (Selamat & Sidhu, 2011) and can lead to ‘more profound learning and improved performance’ as Anderson (2002) argues. Therefore, according to the latter, besides teaching the language in question, teachers should also teach students about ‘what happens during the language learning processes to increase students’ knowledge and consciousness about the use of metacognitive strategies. Moreover, in previous stages at public schools they were not motivated nor put under threat to approach communicative skills; thus, they lack the required experience and have very limited strategies to tackle and master such kind of knowledge. Goh and Hu (2014, p.266) highlight that ‘higher proficiency listeners use more ways for operationalising it but low proficiency learners limit their use to a smaller range of strategies’.

Goh and Hu (2014) also argue that skilled listeners are more certain about responding to the items of a survey with approximately no choices made on ‘partly agree’ or ‘partly disagree’. The participants were described by Goh and Hu (2014) as: ‘they reported the use of some strategies with certainty (i.e. ‘strongly agree’ and ‘agree’) and the non-use of other strategies with equal certainty (i.e. ‘strongly disagree’ and ‘disagree’). The low performing listeners, on the other hand, tend to be less certain in their choices.
Taking the 21 items of the questionnaire separately, participants showed considerable variation when reflecting on their listening strategies, which shows that their answers were not consistently scored and thus their strategy use was not similar. Specifically, the minimum scores revealed by them for the total number of items ranged from 1-3 on the Likert Scale which is a wide range for minimal scores. On the other hand, the maximum scores for every individual item reached an upper limit of 6, except for item number 8 on which nobody ‘strongly agreed’ that ‘listening is a challenging skill’; rather, the highest score given for this item was 5 which is ‘agree’ showing no high certainty about the difficulty of listening. In short, the participants showed a large variance in assigning the items a Likert score; but they were similar when assigning high scores.

Among the five different subscales of the MALQ, the lowest mean was 3.66 which was related to mental translation. Mental translation occurrence should be as low as possible in order for the listener to be a successful listener, but it is moderately employed by these participants. This might be due to their previous method of learning English in which they used to memorize word by word and learn semantic items and chunks out of context. As Vandergrift (2003) found, the less-skilled participants in his study reported using translation more (M=5.21); and the more skilled listeners used translation considerably less, as low as (M=1.85) which is a very low score compared to its counterpart in our study. In other non-statistic words, if students can overcome this pattern of translation, they will become more successful in academic listening comprehension.

The next prominent metacognitive subscale on which participants tend to depend is ‘planning and evaluation’ with a mean score of (3.88). These strategies were the highest effective factors employed in the validation process of the MALQ. This means that the behaviour of participants in the current study did not behave consistently with the supposed results found by the developers of the questionnaire. As the latter argue, the five strategies of (PE) represent ‘having a plan for listening, thinking about similar texts as a guide for listening, having a goal in mind, periodically checking one’s satisfaction with the ongoing interpretation, and evaluating the strategic effectiveness of one’s listening efforts’; all of these strategies are very vital in approaching academic listening tasks. In contrast, the low dependence on such a very important scale will by no means negatively affect students’ metacognitive behaviour and thus the actual performance in listening tasks.

The third emerging subscale of strategies in participants’ metacognitive behaviour was related to their Person Knowledge (PK) with a mean score of (4.1). This subscale was also found in Vandergrift’s et al (2006) to be the third affecting subscale. This in turn shows a good level of consistency about the normal range of this subscale and how students should behave in coping with academic listening tasks. The (PK) of learners as suggested by the developers has to do mainly with three variables: learner perceptions about how difficult listening is when compared to reading, writing and speaking; learners’ anxiety when approaching listening tasks; and learners’ self-efficacy about their listening ability.

The fourth recurring group of strategies has to do with Directed Attention (DA) with a mean score of (4.37). In contrast, this subscale accounted for only 3.2% of the variance found by the MALQ developers as the least affecting group of strategies. The four items enlisted under this factor have to do with strategies that are supposed to make listeners ‘focus harder when having difficulty understanding, recover concentration when one’s mind wanders, and not give up when one experiences difficulties understanding.’

The most noticed category of strategies used by the participants has to do with their ability to ‘solve problems’ with a mean score as high as (4.84) which can be a positive indicator about participants metacognitive behaviour. According to Mohammad Ali and Negin’s study (2014), the six items representing the ability of ‘problem solving’ require listeners to make use of the semantic repertoire, major text concept, related knowledge, experience, and common knowledge to focus in the text in
question to arrive at the required comprehension of ‘unfamiliar vocabularies’). This representation of
(PS) supports the original explanation of Vandergrift et. al (2006) which beside the aforementioned
strategies requires listeners to adjust their interpretation once it turns out to be not correct, ‘monitor the
accuracy of one’s inferences for congruency with the developing interpretation, and compare the
developing interpretation with one’s knowledge of the topic’.

Being optimistic about participants’ metacognitive behaviour, the high dependence upon this subscale
of (PS) strategies was found by Vandergrift et al., (2006) to account for 13% of the total 44.5% of
variance on participating students as the second most affecting factor.

Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to have learners reflect on the way they approach listening to English as
a FL in academic situations, and to reveal the level and range of strategies they use for this purpose.
The MALQ items were our source of data explicitly delivered by students which showed that the
participants are moderately aware of how they listen and what kind of strategies they depend on more.

Furthermore, the overall mean score of every individual subscale suggest that there should be
pedagogical interventions to increase the level of students’ proficiency in listening.

This study along with previous related ones show how students’ metacognitive awareness can be
investigated and revealed, depending on a tool like the MALQ which shows to what extent students
are aware about their metacognition and to what extent they are certain about it (Goh& Hu,2014).
According to the latter, such instrument can be used by learners as ‘a regular checklist over a period of
time for monitoring their own listening development’ and it also can boost their ability to discuss such
mental processes with their teachers. Teachers themselves can also depend on the MALQ as a pre-test
and post-test to monitor their students’ progress in a listening tutorial (Vandergrift et al 2006).

This study might not be able to generalize the results, but at least will create a more thorough
understanding of academic listening difficulties faced by Jordanian students. It paves way for a more
comprehensive research to find more applicable solutions to students’ poor command of listening to a
foreign language.

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