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Challenging Assumptions  
Looking In, Looking Out

# A study of teaching EFL listening strategies

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## Reference data:

Teng, H. (2008). A study of teaching EFL listening strategies.

In K. Bradford Watts, T. Muller, & M. Swanson (Eds.), *JALT2007 Conference Proceedings*. Tokyo: JALT.

The purpose of the present study is to look into the instruction of EFL listening strategies to Taiwanese college students. Subjects were one freshman class of about 50 students at a university. The instruments include a listening strategy questionnaire, and a weekly learning diary. First, subjects completed the questionnaire. Second, in the freshman course *English Listening Practice*, subjects received instruction and practice in the use of EFL listening strategies for 20 minutes weekly for 15 weeks. Each week two listening strategies were taught with examples and exercises designed by the researcher. In total, subjects were able to learn 30 EFL listening strategies. During the instruction phase, subjects were required to keep a weekly learning diary. Finally, subjects received a post-test on the questionnaire. Results of the study provided empirical descriptions of strategy training for L2 listeners. Results also offered some implications for teaching EFL listening comprehension.

今回の研究の目的は台湾の大学生向けのEFL聞く技術の教育を調べることである。対象はある大学約五十人のクラスの一年生である。道具は聞く技術のアンケートと週に一回の学習日記である。まず、学生はアンケートを回答した。次は、一年生の課程『英語聞く練習』中、EFL聞く技術を教えてもらって、練習をした。毎週二十分、十五週続けた。毎週範例と練習を含める研究者が作った聞く技術二つを教えた。学生が習ったEFL聞く技術は総計三十になった。この間、学習日記をつけることも要求された。最後、学生は聞く技術のポストテストを受けた。この研究の結果は第二言語習得者ための方略訓練に経験的説明を提供した。それに、EFL聞く技術の教育に関する考えられるべき問題も出た。

**L**istening to spoken language has been acknowledged theoretically to consist of active and complex processes which determine the level and content of comprehension. Listeners engage in a variety of mental processes in an effort to comprehend information from oral texts. They focus on selected aspects of aural input, construct meaning from passages, and relate what they hear to existing knowledge. However, there is hardly a perfect match between input and knowledge; comprehension gaps occur and special efforts to educe meaning are required, especially for second language learners. The mental processes that

are activated by listeners to understand, learn, or to retain new information from utterances are referred to as listening comprehension strategies.

According to Mendelsohn (1984), L2 learners often do not approach the listening task in the most efficient way despite what they may do in their L1. Chamot and Kupper (1989) also found that L2 learners did not use a very large number of strategies when listening. With the increased attention to learner-centered models of L2 instruction, it is imperative that the teacher not only be a provider of comprehensible input, but be a trainer of listening strategies. As proposed by Mendelsohn (1994), training students how to listen leads to improvement in their listening ability and requires training them in the use of strategies for listening. Furthermore, Rost and Ross (1991) observed the expected correlation between listening proficiency and overall language proficiency.

The purpose of the present study is to look into the instruction of EFL listening strategies to Taiwanese college students. The major research questions explored in the study will be: (1) Can listening strategy instruction facilitate college students' use of EFL listening strategies? (2) What are college students' perceptions toward the instruction of EFL listening strategies?

O'Malley et al. (1985a) have pointed out that continued advances in learning strategy research should permit students to learn L2 more efficiently through classroom instruction. In the last few years, L2 research literature on strategy training has experienced tremendous growth. However, only few studies have looked into the instruction of L2 listening strategies. Among them, very little research has dealt with the instruction of EFL listening strategies to

Taiwanese students. Thus, by providing empirical evidences and descriptions, the present study can seek to contribute to our understanding of the listening strategy instruction, and further to assist the students to become more effective EFL listeners.

### Literature review

From the review of research literature, several studies are found to be directly related to the present study. In the study by O'Malley et al. (1985b), high school ESL students were randomly assigned to receive learning strategy training on vocabulary, listening, and speaking tasks. Results indicated that strategy training can be effective for integrative language tasks. Thompson and Rubin (1996) investigated the effects of metacognitive and cognitive strategy instruction on the listening comprehension performance of American university students learning Russian. They found that the subjects who received strategy instruction in listening to video-recorded texts improved significantly over those who had received no instruction. Besides, Nakata (1999) studied the influence of listening strategy training on Japanese EFL learners' listening competence. Results showed that the effect of listening strategy training was more discernible on perception than on comprehension, especially for those students who received low scores on the G-TELP.

Furthermore, some research has suggested the pedagogical implications for teaching L2 listening strategies. Mendelsohn (1994) has proposed a model of listening course in which there were units on different strategies or aspects of listening, with training activities contained in them. These training activities were specifically designed to give students

practice in utilizing different signals and trying different strategies. Mendelsohn (1998) also reviewed the classroom listening textbooks and found the mismatch between what applied linguists advocated and what the books contained. Besides, Hagino (1999) assessed the activities to foster listening strategies. Three kinds of meaning-focused task for intentional vocabulary learning were conducted in the Japanese EFL classroom. He found that the bilingual word list was the most effective in learning of the L2 vocabulary. Moreover, Laviosa (1999) examined the implementation of a Cognitive Apprenticeship Approach to L2 listening comprehension with intermediate learners of Italian. This model with teacher's and students' interrelated activities consists of such steps as eliciting, modeling, observing, coaching, scaffolding, and fading assistance. Vandergrift (1999) has also explained how L2 listeners can use strategies to enhance their learning processes and how teachers can nurture the development of listening strategies.

In addition, there are a few studies which have provided useful information for the present study. Some research looked into the listening strategies used by L2 learners of different target languages, such as French (DeFillipis, 1980; Vandergrift, 1997), Italian (Laviosa, 1991), Spanish (Bacon, 1992), ESL (Murphy, 1985; O'Malley et al., 1989), Japanese EFL (Rost & Ross, 1991), and Chinese EFL (Huang & Naerssen, 1987). Several studies (Chao, 1999; Chien & Li, 1997; Ku, 1998; Lee, 1997; Lin, 2000; Teng, 1998) have recently examined the listening strategies employed by EFL learners in Taiwan. As for the two studies by Yang (1995, 1996), they investigated how Taiwanese college students improved their use of EFL learning strategies through learning strategy instruction.

## Method

### Subjects

Subjects were 46 students from a freshman class at a university in central Taiwan. Having learned English as a foreign language for about six years in school, they had approximately a low-intermediate level of EFL. Subjects took the required course *English Listening Practice* once a week in the first and second semesters.

### Instrumentation

The instruments used in the study consisted of a listening strategy questionnaire, and weekly learning diary. First, the questionnaire is designed based on Oxford's (1990) model of L2 listening strategies, which provides a complete framework of L2 listening strategies and has been adopted in the researcher's previous studies (Teng, 1996, 1998). It includes six parts, been adopted in the researcher's previous studies (Teng, 1996, 1998). It includes six parts, altogether 51 Likert-scaled items (see Appendix), and is conducted to examine the use of listening strategies employed by the subjects. In the weekly learning diary, subjects are required to write down what they have learned from each session of the listening strategy instruction and their perceptions toward the instruction. To elicit more information from the subjects, the questionnaire was asked and answered in Chinese. They were also allowed to keep the weekly learning diary in Chinese.

### Procedures

The whole experiment consisted of three steps, i.e., description, instruction, and evaluation. First, subjects completed the questionnaire on EFL listening strategies. Second, subjects received instruction and practice in the use of EFL listening strategies for 20 minutes weekly for 15 weeks. Due to the limitation of instruction time, 30 listening strategies from the 51 items in the questionnaire were included in the instruction syllabus (see Table 1). Each week two listening strategies were taught with examples and exercises designed by the researcher. In total, subjects were able to learn 30 listening strategies. During the instructional phase, subjects were also required to keep a weekly learning journal. After the 15 weeks of strategy instruction, subjects received a post-test on the listening strategy questionnaire, and submitted their learning diaries.

**Table 1. Syllabus of listening strategy instruction**

Week	Strategy Group	No.	Strategy
1	Memory	1	Grouping
		2	Associating/elaborating
2	Memory	3	Using imagery
		4	Semantic mapping
3	Memory	5	Using physical response or sensation
		6	Using mechanical techniques
4	Cognitive	7	Repeating
		8	Formally practicing with sounds

5	Cognitive	9	Recognizing and using formulas and patterns
		10	Practicing naturally
6	Cognitive	11	Analyzing expressions
		12	Translating
7	Cognitive	13	Taking notes
		14	Summarizing
8	Compensation	15	Using linguistic clues
		16	Using other clues
9	Metacognitive	17	Paying attention
		18	Delaying speech production to focus on listening
10	Metacognitive	19	Finding out about language learning
		20	Organizing
11	Metacognitive	21	Setting goals and objectives
		22	Seeking practice opportunities
12	Affective	23	Using progressive relaxation, or deep breathing
		24	Using music
13	Affective	25	Using a checklist
		26	Writing a language learning diary
14	Social	27	Asking for clarification and verification
		28	Cooperating with peers
15	Social	29	Developing cultural understanding
		30	Becoming aware of others' thoughts and feelings

### Data analysis

For the strategy questionnaire, the scale range for each item is 1-5. Frequency counting, and paired t-test were conducted to analyze subjects' scores on the questionnaire in the pre-test and the post-test. Subjects' learning diaries were also categorized and listed.

### Results

#### *Paired t-test for strategy use*

The main intent of the present study is to empirically investigate the effect of listening strategy instruction on college students' use of EFL listening strategies. Based on the research purpose, subjects' responses to the strategy questionnaires completed before and after the strategy instruction respectively were analyzed and compared.

The results of paired t-test are described below. Significant differences refer to the differences between pre-instruction and post-instruction. First, Table 2 indicates that among the six strategy categories, there is significant difference in subjects' strategy use of the five categories except the compensation strategies. Significant difference was also found for the total listening strategies employed by the subjects.

**Table 2. Paired t-test for strategy categories**

Category	N	Pre-test		Post-test		t
		Mean	SD	Mean	SD	
Memory	10	2.42	0.35	2.79	0.26	6.26**
Cognitive	14	2.72	0.40	2.95	0.28	4.47**
Compensation	2	3.09	0.31	3.28	0.22	3.00
Metacognitive	11	2.31	0.40	2.66	0.25	6.23**
Affective	9	1.89	0.29	2.45	0.27	10.97**
Social	5	2.10	0.62	2.58	0.48	6.54**
Total	51	2.38	0.25	2.75	0.12	12.54**

\*\* p<0.01

**Table 3. Paired t-test for individual memory strategy**

Memory Strategy	N	Pre-test		Post-test		t
		Mean	SD	Mean	SD	
Grouping	46	2.35	1.27	2.89	0.82	3.32**
Associating/Elaborating	46	2.72	1.11	3.09	0.96	2.57*
Placing new words into a context	46	2.22	1.05	2.85	0.82	4.11**
Using imagery	46	2.52	1.15	2.72	1.00	1.27
Semantic mapping	46	2.83	0.95	2.96	0.92	1.00
Using keywords	46	2.80	1.15	2.96	1.03	0.98
Representing sounds in memory	46	2.61	1.24	3.00	1.05	2.85**
Structured reviewing	46	2.39	1.02	2.78	0.94	3.31**

Memory Strategy	N	Pre-test		Post-test		t
		Mean	SD	Mean	SD	
Using physical response or sensation	46	1.78	0.92	2.41	0.93	4.20**
Using mechanical techniques	46	2.00	0.82	2.26	0.93	1.77*

\*  $p < 0.05$ , \*\*  $p < 0.01$

With regard to the results of paired t-test on individual item within six strategy categories. Table 3 indicates that among the 10 strategies in the ‘memory’ category, the frequency of use increased significantly for the following seven strategies, including ‘grouping’, ‘associating/elaborating’, ‘placing new words into a context’, ‘representing sounds in memory’, and ‘using mechanical techniques.’

As for the 14 cognitive strategies, the significant increase of strategy use was found for six listening strategies, i.e., ‘formally practicing with sounds and writing systems’, ‘recognizing and using formulas and patterns’, ‘practicing naturalistically’, ‘using resources for receiving and sending messages’, ‘taking notes’, and ‘highlighting.’ Moreover, results show that there is significant increase for the listening strategy ‘using other clues’ among the two compensation strategies.

Among the 11 listening strategies in the ‘metacognitive’ category, there is significant increase for nine of them except the two strategies ‘paying attention’, and ‘finding out about language learning.’ Besides, it is indicated that there is significant difference between the pre-test and the post-

test for all of the nine listening strategies in the ‘affective’ category. Among the five social strategies, the significant increase of strategy use was found for four of them except the strategy ‘asking for clarification and verification.’

### *Perceptions toward strategy instruction*

In the present study, subjects were required to keep learning diaries to write down what they have learned from each session of the listening strategy instruction and their perceptions toward the instruction. Results of the learning diary were presented in accordance with subjects’ learning, perceptions, and suggestions of EFL listening strategies.

In terms of what the subjects have learned from the instruction of EFL listening strategies, their responses include the following items: some methods which were not used before, learning how to classify and discuss, increasing listening ability, learning how to analyze a word (e.g. prefix) and recognize a word from hints, catching key words and spelling, vocabularies and sentences, grammar, how to think and memorize, guessing words, and how to listen to English conversation.

Furthermore, with respect to subjects’ perceived differences in EFL listening ability after receiving the strategy instruction, their responses include the following items. It makes no differences. Make a little progress. There is sort of improvement, but if we can’t find our own learning methods, we can’t make much progress. Have a better understanding of using strategies to learn vocabulary. Understand the content easily. Know some methods of learning English. Have better comprehension based on the context. Have more confidence.

Understand English easily. Have better ability to speak out. Understand some basic vocabulary and sentence patterns. Understand the keywords. Know how to guess. Change the thoughts and attitudes toward English. Employ more learning strategies to practice listening.

As for subjects' perceptions toward the usefulness of EFL listening strategy instruction, their responses include the following items. It does not change at all. It helps less because we do not use often. Sort of, I know more ways to learn English. I can find my own learning methods. I can memorize easily. Some conversations can be understood. The strategies are quite good. It helps if you relax and have listening practice; then you can understand more content. It helps me to learn English listening because I can learn correct ways of English listening by experts' advices. I can make use of what I have learned to judge the meaning of new words. I can analyze the characteristics of English and make English learning easier. It can increase the chances of learning. We will have goals for learning. If we follow the strategies, we should make progress. Some strategies do not help; for example, it asks me to form an image for the vocabulary, but I did not even know the Chinese meanings of the word, and it is impossible to associate.

Finally, the suggestions for teaching EFL listening strategies proposed by the subjects include the following items. Students need more practice. The teachers can introduce contents more clearly and give more examples. Group discussion can be used. To teach slowly is much better. The teachers can review the listening strategies. The teacher can continue using this method in class. Instruction time is not enough. To provide tapes is better.

## Discussion

In the current research, results indicate that there is significant difference in the subjects' use of listening strategies. That is, subjects employed significantly more strategies after they received the instruction of listening strategies. The results support those of some previous studies on strategy instruction. For example, O'Malley et al. (1985b) indicated that strategy training can be effective on integrative language tasks for ESL students. Moreover, Thompson & Rubin (1996) found that American students learning Russian who received listening strategy instruction improved significantly over those who had received no instruction. Vandergrift (1999) has also proposed that teachers can nurture the development of listening strategies for L2 learners. Thus, the present study has confirmed the facilitating effect of strategy instruction on the use of EFL listening strategies.

As for the influence of strategy training on the use of individual listening strategy, some findings were discussed below. First, results show that there is no significant increase of strategy use for the memory strategies 'using imagery' and 'semantic mapping.' Several subjects also noted in their learning diaries that this strategy did not help since it was difficult to form an image for the vocabulary when they did not even know the word meanings. Therefore, strategy instruction seems to be not so effective for EFL listeners to learn remembering by means of visual images.

Besides, the present study found that subjects' use of some cognitive strategies did not increase significantly after the strategy instruction. These strategies which include 'reasoning deductively', 'analyzing expressions',

‘analyzing contrastively across languages’, ‘translating’, and ‘transferring’ all belong to the strategy set ‘analyzing and reasoning.’ It seems to be somewhat difficult to teach EFL learners how to apply logical thinking to listening comprehension. On the other hand, significant increase of strategy use was found for such cognitive strategies as ‘practicing naturalistically’, ‘using resources for receiving and sending messages’, ‘taking notes’ and ‘highlighting’ since they were more concrete and mechanical in nature and thus can be taught more easily and effectively.

According to the results, after the strategy training subjects used significantly more affective strategies on lowering one’s anxiety, encouraging oneself, and taking one’s emotional temperature. This finding is consistent with Nakata’s (1999) which revealed that the effect of listening strategy training was more obvious on perception than on comprehension, especially for EFL learners of low proficiency. It is suggested that listening strategy instruction can make EFL learners have more positive perception toward the task of learning listening comprehension.

In addition, the present study indicated that subjects used more social strategies on cooperating and empathizing with others after they received listening strategy training. However, there is no significant difference for the social strategy ‘asking for clarification and verification.’ It is probably due to the fact that this strategy on asking questions involves more linguistic knowledge than the other four social strategies. The subjects who were low-intermediate EFL learners found it somewhat difficult to use this strategy even after the strategy instruction.

Finally, the current research confirmed the positive effect of keeping learning journals on using listening strategies.

The results support Katchen’s (1996) which found Taiwanese college students had more awareness on EFL listening comprehension after keeping listening journals for one semester.

## Conclusion

The present study revealed that Taiwanese college students employed significantly more strategies after they received the instruction of EFL listening strategies. It has confirmed the facilitating effect of strategy instruction on the use of EFL listening strategies. Moreover, it is suggested that listening strategy instruction can make learners have more positive perception toward the task of learning listening comprehension. The study also confirmed the positive effect of keeping learning journals on using listening strategies. Results of the study provided empirical descriptions of strategy training for L2 listeners, and also offered some implications for teaching students how to employ EFL listening strategies. In sum, the current study proposes that systematic strategy instruction may result in the improvement of strategy use for EFL listener. Students should be not only exposed to listening comprehension but also taught how to listen effectively.

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## Appendix

### Listening Strategy Questionnaire (English Version)

1. Never or almost never true of me
2. Usually not true of me
3. Somewhat true of me
4. Usually true of me
5. Always or almost always true of me

### Memory Strategy

1. I group the words I hear according to their meanings and features.
2. I associate the new content I hear with my original knowledge.
3. I place the new words or phrases I hear into a meaningful context, such as sentences, short paragraphs, stories.
4. I use imagery or picture to form, or draw the things I hear.
5. I use semantic mapping to elaborate the relative content I hear.
6. I associate the new lexicon I hear with the image of a certain Chinese word.
7. I associate the new lexicon I heard with the representing sounds of a certain Chinese word.

8. I review the content I hear with structure, continuance, and repetition.
9. I use physical response or sensation to present the content I hear.
10. I use cards or notes to write down the new lexicon I hear.

### Cognitive Strategy

1. I listen over and over again.
2. I practice with the recognition of sounds and intonation.
3. I recognize and use the sentence structure.
4. I practice with the listening materials that appear in daily lives.
5. I focus on the theme or a certain detail when listen to an article.
6. I use references, such as dictionary, grammar book, encyclopedia, to find out the meaning of the listening content.
7. I use reasoning deductive thinking to assume the meaning of the listening content.
8. I analyze and deconstruct the lexicon, phrase, or sentence I hear.
9. I analyze contrastively the lexicon, phrase, or sentence structure I hear across English and Mandarin.
10. I translate the original content I hear into Chinese.

11. I apply the original language knowledge to understand the listening content.
12. I take notes about what I hear.
13. I conclude the content I hear.
14. I underline, capitalize, and bold the important points in the listening content.

### Compensation strategy

1. I use either English or Chinese linguistic clues, such as prefix, suffix, sentence structure, to guess the listening content.
2. I use other clues, such as addressing, facial experience, body languages, to guess the listening content.

### Metacognitive strategy

1. I preview the important points of listening materials and link it with already known knowledge.
2. I pay attention to the listening activities without being interfere; I pay attention to the certain details in listening materials.
3. I delay speech production to focus on listening.
4. I try to find out the way of learning English listening.
5. I organize the progress of learning English listening, or arrange the appropriate listening environment.
6. I set goals and objectives of learning English listening.

7. I identify the purpose of learning English listening.
8. I plan the relevant issues for the listening activities.
9. I seek opportunities for practice English listening, such as listening to English radio, songs and talk to foreigners.
10. I do self-monitoring to see if I can understand the listening content, and try to correct the errors.
11. I do self-evaluating to exam my progress of learning English listening.

### Affective Strategy

1. I use progressive relaxation, deep breathing, or meditation before stepping into English listening activities.
2. I listen to music before stepping into English listening activities.
3. I use laughter, such as talking jokes, reading comic books, before stepping into English listening activities.
4. I make positive statements in order to increase my self-confidence before stepping into English listening activities.
5. I reward myself, such as having a good meal, going out for a rid, after stepping into English listening activities.
6. I listen to my body, such as checking for headache or stomachache, before stepping into English listening activities.

7. I use a checklist to evaluate my situation of learning English listening.
8. I write a language learning diary to record my attitude of learning English listening.
9. I discuss my feelings with someone else about learning English listening.

### Social Strategy

1. I will ask for slow down the speed, repeating, explaining, or confirm my understanding while speaking.
2. I cooperate with my peers to devote ourselves to games or tasks about English listening.
3. I cooperate with the native English speaker.
4. I develop cultural understanding toward America and England.
5. I am aware of speakers' thoughts and feelings.