

# Learner Reflections on Listening Strategies to Foster Learner Development

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## Reference Data:

Niewalda, K. (2015). Learner reflections on listening strategies to foster learner development. In P. Clements, A. Krause & H. Brown (Eds.), *JALT2014 Conference Proceedings*. Tokyo: JALT.

In this paper, an action research project on foreign language listening in the German as a foreign language (GFL) classroom is described. The aim of the study was to examine the feasibility of a metacognitive approach in FL listening instruction in order to integrate elements of learner autonomy into a more systematic course design. In the study, 2nd-year university learners were asked to not only undertake required tasks, but also to reflect on problems they faced and strategies they used. The results show that learners were conscious of their use of strategies, but there were different levels of awareness. Based on the findings of several action research cycles and supported by other research in this field, the researcher emphasises the importance of raising students' awareness of learning processes to promote learning autonomy in the long term.

本論では、外国語としてのドイツ語 (GFL) の授業における外国語 (FL) リスニングのアクション・リサーチ・プロジェクトについて論ずる。本研究の目的は、学習者の自律的学習を促進する要素をより体系的なコースデザインへ取り込むため、FLリスニングの指導にメタ認知アプローチをどう生かすことができるかを考察することである。本研究においては、大学2年次生を対象に、与えられたタスクに取り組んでもらい、タスク中に感じた問題点や使用したストラテジーについて振り返りを行ってもらった。その結果、学習者は自身がストラテジーを使用していたことを分かっていたが、その意識レベルについては差異があるということが明らかとなった。先行研究及び本アクション・リサーチの結果に基づき、筆者は長期に及ぶ学習自律性を推進するために、学習課程への学生の意識づけを高めることが重要だと考える。

**A**N ACTION research project in the German as a foreign language (GFL) classroom is reported on in this paper. The objective of the study was to investigate how a metacognitive pedagogical sequence—the reflective cycle from Vandergrift and Goh (2012)—could be integrated into the design of a basic German course at a private university in Japan. In particular, the aim was to examine student reactions, through frequent written and oral reflections on their listening comprehension ability, and their use of listening strategies to identify potential benefits for both the teacher and the learners resulting from this activity. The findings will be used in designing an appropriate approach to help learners becoming more reflective and self-regulated.

Self-regulation includes not only the use of cognitive strategies, but also metacognitive strategies for helping students to become—in the long term—more autonomous, which is an important goal for language learners (e.g., Holec, 1981; Tönshoff, 2007). Researchers agree this is a necessity in supporting and guiding learners to take responsibility for their learning, so that they are able to monitor their learning process in order to set goals and plan the steps to achieve these goals.



In the first section, the conceptual framework of the study is described, followed by explanations for why action research was used as a tool for this project. After defining the problem, research questions and the method are presented. Then, three research cycles with their different phases are described. Research questions of the subsequent cycles and detailed descriptions of the procedure of the respective cycles are included. Finally, the conclusions are presented in reference to the benefits and challenges faced by the teacher and students during the project.

## Conceptual Framework

### *Learner Development and Self-Regulation as a Key to L2 Proficiency*

Wenden (2002) described the two foundational ideas that lead to the field of learner development, which is an answer to the problem of learner diversity, with the aim of helping individual learners to improve their learning ability. These foundational ideas are self-directed language learning (SDLL) and learner strategies in language learning (LSLL). The view of human cognition as an active processing of information led to the first research on learning strategies and the recognition of the distinction between metacognitive and cognitive learning strategies. LSLL has to be seen as derived from Rubin's (1975, pp. 46-48) research on the good language learner, which lists seven strategies a good language learner uses. A good language learner (a) can deal with uncertainty, (b) has a strong will to communicate and to learn from communication, (c) is not inhibited, (d) analyses patterns in the language, (e) practises, (f) monitors his speech and learns from mistakes, and (f) considers the context of the speech act. Rubin further claimed that these habits would help less successful language learners to become better learners. However, there are more variables—for example attitude, motivation, and intelligence—that influence success in language learning. Self-regulated learners can overcome obstacles and are able to

motivate themselves (Zimmermann, 1990). They can use different techniques and strategies to help themselves become more self-directed in their learning. This leads, as a result, to more effective learning with greater control and is described as the ultimate goal, which is seen as a key to L2 proficiency (Oxford, 2011). Shifts in emphasis away from the good language learner to the individual learner and from interest in the quantity to the quality of strategy use resulted in an increasing interest in metacognition (Grenfell & Macaro, 2007). Why it is important to develop metacognitive awareness is described in more detail below.

### *Learning Strategies as Elements of Self-Regulation and the Role of Metacognitive Awareness*

Following Oxford (2011), in the current study learning strategies are considered as elements that can facilitate language learning and can lead in the long term to more self-regulation and autonomy. Bimmel (2012) addressed another important and controversial learning strategy: the role of awareness when using learning strategies. The distinction between whether a strategy is used consciously or not has didactical consequences and was therefore crucial for my study. Bimmel considered Westhoff's (2001) definition of a learning strategy (an action plan in order to achieve a learning goal) to be important, because this conception distinguishes between a learning strategy as a conscientious plan that is implemented to achieve a learning goal and as the concrete realisation of strategic learning actions.

Another important implication concerns the two different roles of the learner: that of the mental manager of cognitive processes (e.g., planning and evaluating learning) and that of the executor of the strategic learning action (e.g., taking notes). Metacognitive awareness manages the learning process, such as the use of strategies, and enables the learner to set goals and monitor his or

her learning. Oxford (2011) identified four levels of explicitness in strategy instruction. Only level 4 involves metacognitive awareness, namely reflecting on the strategy, evaluating success, and transferring the strategy to new tasks. Oxford came to the conclusion that the more explicit the strategy instruction, the more successful it is. It seems therefore highly recommendable to integrate awareness-raising elements systematically right from the beginning of strategy instruction to maximize strategy use.

### Action Research for Curriculum Change

Action research is a means to improve teaching practices as well as a useful tool for examining the classroom situation systematically in order to address current classroom issues or to introduce curriculum changes (McKernan, 1996). This is a very useful method because it allows the teacher to take on two roles at the same time: the producer and the user of theory (Riding, Fowell, & Levy, 1995). Based on the teacher's individual teaching situation and emphasizing the close connection between theory and practice, action research is a response to empirical research, which does not consider the local context. There are various methods for gathering data. For example, teacher diaries, field notes, questionnaires, and interviews. The teacher diary, in particular, can be considered as familiar and practicable in contrast to perhaps intimidating empirical research methods (Altrichter & Posch, 1994).

The cyclical process—seen by most researchers as a spiral, because several cycles should follow each other—is characteristic of an action research project and is one of the strong points of action research. Kemmis and McTaggart (1988) identified four phases of an action research cycle: planning, action, observation, and reflection.

Three such research cycles were carried out for the present study. The data were mainly gathered through written reflections by the students, observations, and field notes. Notes and summaries in the teacher diary were made after each session while the students

were discussing their problems with listening comprehension or were working on their listening tasks. The learners' answers were collected and analysed to determine their level of metacognitive awareness.

### Problem Definition and Research Questions

The present research concentrated on listening, one of the four major skills. Many learners at the end of the 1st and during the 2nd year of their study of GFL seem to have difficulties when engaged in listening tasks. Moreover, many students find it problematic to speak about listening tasks and processes, especially when listening activities become more challenging. This is often a difficult situation for teachers, because they cannot identify the students' problems and do not know why understanding broke down (Field, 2008).

In the field of listening, the metacognitive approach of Vandergrift and Goh (2012) is a helpful method for encouraging the learners to become more reflective. They defined metacognition as the "ability to think about our own thinking or 'cognition' and, by extension, to think about how we process information for a range of purposes and manage the way we do it" (pp. 83-84). They suggested a metacognitive pedagogical sequence, whose particular steps are explained in detail in the method section.

In order to explore the learners' level of awareness, three action research cycles were carried out. The research questions of the different cycles are outlined in each of the sections describing them. The main research questions of this study were the following:

1. To what extent are students able to speak about listening problems and strategies?
2. Are there any challenges or benefits for the teacher and the learners when reflections are systematically carried out before and after listening exercises? If yes, which insights do they provide for the teacher's future lesson planning?

## Method

### Context of the Study

The class took place twice a week, and each session lasted 90 minutes. Two teachers, a German native speaker and a Japanese native speaker, taught the class alternately. The class was a four-skills class and followed a communicative approach that involved pair and group work.

### Participants

There were 13 learners in the class; 11 were English majors and two were enrolled in business administration. Ten attended the class regularly and three came only sporadically. They had started learning German one year before, which means their level was about A1 of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages.

### Teaching Materials and Procedure

Listening tasks were mainly taken from the textbook *Menschen* (Evans, Pude, & Specht, 2012). To enhance the students' awareness of cognitive and metacognitive thinking, I worked with the metacognitive pedagogical sequence described in Vandergrift and Goh (2012). The metacognitive processes are stimulated in several stages. The sequence includes a planning phase, two verifications (with a classmate and in plenary), an individual verification, and a reflection about the listening task. This was to make the learners judge their use of strategies and set up goals for the next listening task. The stages and the process of listening are described in Table 1.

Table 1. Stages in the Metacognitive Pedagogical Sequence (Vandergrift & Goh, 2012, p. 109)

Stimulated key metacognitive process	Stage
Planning	Planning/predicting ➤ First listen
Monitoring, evaluation, and planning	First verification and plan with peers for second listen ➤ Second listen
Monitoring, evaluation, and problem-solving	Second verification and text reconstruction or other comprehension activity ➤ Third listen
Monitoring and problem-solving	Final verification
Evaluation and planning	Reflection and goal-setting

## Research Cycles

### Cycle 1

#### Planning

A questionnaire was designed to find out more about the learners' problems with and attitudes towards listening. Because of the beginner level of the students, the questionnaire was in Japanese. Furthermore, I wanted the students to express themselves without thinking about language problems (for a discussion of the language of strategy instruction, see Oxford, 2011). Following are the questions asked:

- Do you want to improve your listening skill?
- Please describe your attitude towards listening tasks in general.

- What do you think is difficult when it comes to listening tasks?
- What strategies do you use during listening tasks?

The findings from the questionnaire were to form a starting point for integrating listening instruction more systematically into the lessons. In accordance with the aim of action research—to investigate issues within one’s own teaching context—it seemed appropriate, in this phase of the project, not to refer too much to other research, but rather to concentrate on the issues I had identified in the classroom situation and therefore to formulate the questions accordingly.

### Action

The students were informed that there was going to be a focus on developing their listening skills. The above questionnaire was handed out during regular class time. Twelve learners were present and filled in the questionnaire. Their answers were translated with the help of a native speaker of Japanese.

### Observation and Reflection

Results showed that all of them were interested in developing their listening skills. One learner described herself as the “listening type,” which is why she wanted to develop this skill. No negative comments on listening, such as anxiety or refusal, were reported. Whereas the learners considered this skill to be important, they were very aware that listening was challenging and difficult.

The problems they described are categorised in Table 2. Several problems were common among the learners in the study. Their main concerns were a lack of vocabulary to understand and the speed of delivery. Many mentioned problems about the amount of vocabulary they considered necessary for the listening task. Often learners reported that they understood single words, but were not

able to understand the meaning of the sentence as a whole. Another commonly cited problem was an inability to connect sound and the written word. The second most frequent response category referred to the speaking of the listening text; 10 students out of 12 had problems following the text because the speaking speed was too fast. In addition, four learners wrote about concentration problems and two learners could not identify any specific problem.

Table 2. Listening Problems Students Identified  
( $N = 11$ )

Category	Examples of students’ responses (translated)	No. of responses
Vocabulary	I do not have enough vocabulary.	11
	I do not recognise words.	
	I only understand individual words.	
	I can’t make a connection between sound and written word.	
Speech speed	Too fast	10
	No repetitions	
Concentration	I have a hard time to concentrate.	4
Other	Listening is difficult in general.	2
	Everything is difficult.	

The strategies used by the students before and during the listening activities are shown in Table 3. Generally, the learners’ comments referred to the planning phase before listening starts, in which they considered the situation and vocabulary. The comment “preparing myself for fast speed” shows clearly that one learner was well aware of her problem. Others mentioned inference strategies and found sound effects and different voices to be helpful.

**Table 3. Strategies Used by the Students During Listening Tasks (N = 12)**

Category	Examples of students' responses (translated)	No. of responses
Planning	I read the listening task carefully, before listening.	7
	I ask the teacher or a classmate if there are words I don't understand.	
	I prepare myself for fast speech speed.	
	I try not to miss the beginning.	
Inference	I am aware of the context of the situation.	4
	I find it helpful, when the voices are different.	
Checking	I check the noises, they also give hints about the content.	4
	I stop the CD after each sentence.	
	I use my dictionary (if possible, but often it is too fast).	
	If possible, I would read the transcript before listening.	
	I listen to every sentence several times.	

There were learners who were able to cope well with the listening tasks, but others wrote about strategies that are not useful in a real listening situation, for example using a dictionary and stopping the CD after every sentence. Some learners wished to control the listening situation by reading the transcript while listening.

In the first cycle, the learners reflected on their attitude, problems, and strategies in relation to their listening comprehension. Already that small group of 12 learners was very heterogeneous concerning the level of awareness of the problems and strategies.

The listening problems they identified—unknown vocabulary and not being able to recognise words—were similarly noted in studies by Goh (2000) and Hasan (2000). Listening tasks can involve a degree of uncertainty and ambiguity, which is a real challenge for learners who judge their level of proficiency and confidence as being low (O'Donnell, 2003).

## Cycle 2

### Planning

Because of the heterogeneity of the students' answers concerning their level of awareness, I decided to refer, in the next step of the project, to a concrete listening experience. This was under the assumption that it might be easier for weaker students to reflect directly after an actual listening task. The questions in this reflection were the following:

- How difficult was the task?
- What exactly was difficult?
- Which strategies did you use?

### Action

Based on the metacognitive approach, I used integrated exercises and combined the normal listening tasks with reflection tasks. The reflections (in Japanese) were collected and the teacher gave feedback based on the reflections 1 week later.

### Observation and Reflection

In total, the learners wrote six reflections on different tasks from the textbook used in class. The degree of difficulty of the tasks was judged differently. The problems referred mainly to vocabulary and speed issues. Other problems were task related: For example, one student had difficulties in recognising names. Concerning strate-

gies, the comparison of answers with classmates was much appreciated by the learners. In class discussions, individual learners voiced their specific listening problems; others reacted by giving advice. For example, one learner pointed out that it is essential to read and understand the questions beforehand, because even short words like negations can make a big difference. After individual reflections, feedback through the teacher, and discussions in plenary, the emphasis in the third cycle was on the social component.

### Cycle 3 Planning

Co-constructing knowledge through discussion is considered to be one of the guiding principles of metacognitive instruction. There is not enough research on its effectiveness so far, since development of listening skills is mainly seen as an individual issue (Goh, 2008). Because the learners judged interactive aspects very positively in Cycle 2, I decided to explore social elements in Cycle 3.

### Action

The learners were put into groups of three to discuss their own listening strategies. The procedure during the listening task followed the metacognitive sequence depicted in Table 1. The learners were asked to discuss in their group and write down the answers to the following questions before the first listening phase:

- Which words can we expect to hear?
- Which difficulties do we expect?

In the next step, students listened to the text, followed by a group discussion about its content. After having listened a second time, they compared their answers again in the same group. The text was played a third time. The learners discussed—again in the same

group—and wrote comments in Japanese on the following questions on a poster:

- Which strategies did we use during the task?
- What was difficult? What was easy?
- How did we feel about the class today?

### Observation and Reflection

The students then presented their poster and explained their statements to the other groups, so as to exchange opinions among groups. The author observed the groups while they were discussing. On November 6, 2014, I made this remark in my diary:

Learners judged teamwork as positive in their reflective comments, and in most of the studies on metacognitive instructions discussions with partners seem to be essential and very helpful. Nevertheless, I had the impression while observing the groups that they had rather a hard time. From my observation, it seems that there were hardly any real discussions from two groups out of the three. Instead I saw the students passing the paper around while asking: “Do you want to comment on something? I really don’t know what to write.” Two students did not seem to understand the purpose of the exercise, since they were wondering about the meaning of the word “strategy.” I realised that some of the rather quiet students did not engage in the conversation at all. (author’s personal diary)

Even though a real discussion—exchanging opinions on listening problems and strategies—was not observed, students came up with the comments shown in Table 4.

**Table 4. Students' Comments During Group Discussion on Listening Problems and Strategies**

Comment topic	Comment
Before listening	
Expected difficult points	Fast / I don't understand words
Strategies	Get used to the text / take notes
After listening	
Difficult points	Perfect tense / Words / Grammar / Many unknown words / too fast / difficult to recognize words / synonyms

Learners seemed to cope better when writing reflections individually or when discussing in plenary than they did in the group discussions. The students did not comment on how they felt about the class on that day and they seemed to find it difficult to talk about their listening difficulties and strategies in the group phases. Quiet learners participated in neither the discussion nor writing comments on the poster. Although the teacher explained and read the learners' comments during the individual reflection, the concept of *strategy* did not seem to be clear to all.

The students' weak conclusions—weak when compared to the individual written reflections and plenary discussions of Cycle 1 and Cycle 2—might also be a result of the level of the listening task being too difficult. The students who said that they did not know what to write might have been overstrained by the level of the task or were not interested in the topic. Since the discussion took place in Japanese there were no language issues involved. The importance of level and topic should not be underestimated. In a study in which students used different strategies when watching a video O'Malley, Chamot, Stewner-Manzanares, Russo, and Küpper (1985) found that learners considered strategies to be useful when they were interested in the video or had enough knowledge of the video's topic. Chen's

(2005) findings suggested that learners are more willing to practise strategy use with tasks they consider not too difficult concerning vocabulary, grammar, topics, or length.

## Implications and Conclusions

The central aims of the study were to explore the students' learning awareness in listening and to then draw conclusions for further lesson planning. The starting point was my observations of students' reactions and difficulties during listening tasks. It is therefore not surprising to come to conclusions that refer primarily to this specific learning context. Such conclusions are, however, also relevant to other learning contexts facing similar challenges or those held under similar circumstances. The reflection cycles also have application to other areas of skills development.

Individual written reflections—in general at the beginning of the course and after the listening tasks—were conducted as well as discussions in plenary and in groups. Results showed that learners' awareness of their learning processes was very heterogeneous. Some learners had a high awareness and could give advice to others during plenary discussions, while some did not participate actively during conversations about listening. Since it is difficult to decide if this approach is useful for them, further inquiries through (group) interviews, informal talks, or written statements would be necessary. It was encouraging to see that most learners in this study, even though they were beginners, were interested and found it useful to talk about problems and strategies while developing their listening skills. Indeed, research has shown that a metacognitive approach is useful for learners of different levels in various learning contexts, such as beginning-level high school students (Vandergrift, 2002) or young learners (Goh & Taib, 2006).

Concerning the reflection methods used, it seems essential to give the students different possibilities for discussing language learning. Collaboration was identified as essential for the learners in the



described study. It would be interesting to further examine how co-constructing knowledge of learning processes is happening and considered by the learners, if students who have better developed skills can profit from such an approach as well as learners who have more difficulties with listening, and how to deal with learners who need more guidance than others.

Using action research as a means to develop course content was a good and practicable approach. Methods like short reflections, observations, field notes, teacher diary, and discussions in plenary did not require much preparation and led to interesting insights. However, the fact that the reflections were in Japanese was rather a challenge for me, as I needed more time to prepare and follow up the lessons. To conclude, I want to stress the importance of collaboration, which is an essential element of action research and another variable that teachers and researchers could investigate.

## Bio Data

**Katrin Niewalda** has been teaching German as a foreign language at Matsuyama University since 2011. She obtained her master's degree in teaching GFL in 2010. Her research interests are L2 didactics and teacher development.

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