

## EQUIPPING LEARNERS WITH LISTENING STRATEGIES IN ENGLISH LANGUAGE CLASSES

### İNGİLİZCE DERSLERİNDE ÖĞRENCİLERE DİNLEME STRATEJİLERİNİN KAZANDIRILMASI

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**ABSTRACT:** This study aimed at investigating beginner level English language learners' perspectives on the listening skill with regard to several dimensions, and to find out the extent to which the learners who have been trained in listening strategies actually use them while listening. The study took place at the English Preparatory School of an English medium university. Forty-one learners participated in this study. The study was based on qualitative data that were collected through two means: a survey questionnaire and think-aloud protocols. The findings indicate that a few students in this study considered themselves good at listening. Not so many students knew about listening strategies and they thought that a training might help them be more successful in English. The results of the think aloud protocols suggest that if students are given training in listening strategies, they will make use of these strategies while listening to texts.

**Keywords:** English preparatory school, listening skill, strategy use, think-aloud protocols.

**ÖZET:** Bu çalışmanın amacı başlangıç düzeyinde İngilizce öğrenen öğrencilerin dinleme becerisiyle ilgili görüşlerini araştırmak ve dinleme stratejileri üzerine eğitim verilen öğrencilerin bu stratejileri dinleme sürecinde aktif olarak ne derece kullandıklarını ortaya çıkarmaktır. Çalışma İngilizce eğitim veren bir üniversitenin hazırlık okulunda gerçekleştirilmiştir. Araştırmaya 41 öğrenci katılmıştır. Veriler anket ve sesli düşünme protokolleri yoluyla toplanmıştır. Bulgular çok az sayıda öğrencinin kendisinin dinleme konusunda iyi olduğunu düşündüğünü ve dinleme stratejilerinin pek fazla öğrenci tarafından bilinmediğini ortaya çıkarmıştır. Katılımcılar dinleme stratejileri konusunda alabilecekleri bir eğitimin faydalı olacağı görüşündedirler. Sesli düşünme protokolleri öğrencilere böyle bir eğitim verilmesi durumunda öğrendikleri stratejileri dinlemede kullanacaklarını göstermektedir.

**Anahtar Sözcükler:** İngilizce hazırlık okulu, dinleme becerisi, strateji kullanımı, sesli düşünme protokolleri.

#### 1. INTRODUCTION

In foreign language teaching and learning, listening skill has attracted the least attention of the four skills when the amount of research done in all four skills and the curricula of most foreign language programs are considered (Call, 1985). Researchers used to regard listening as a passive skill but since the 80's it has been accepted as an active skill. Listening had often been considered something which could just be picked up by learners. Thus, teachers saw little need for developing a specific research agenda to teach listening.

Yet, listening is a highly refined skill which includes a number of different cognitive and affective mechanisms. It is not only the process of a unidirectional receiving of audible sounds but also a psychomotor process of receiving sound waves through the ear and transmitting nerve impulses to the brain, and an interactive process as the brain acts on the impulses (Brown, 2001). Some essential features of the listening process can be listed as follows:

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1. Listening is an interpretive process through which listeners generate internal texts which commonly differ from what they hear in unexpected ways (Murphy, 1985). The listener, therefore, has to put all his energy to communicate with the text.
2. Listening is an active process where the listener makes use of the necessary strategies which will lead him to the meaning. The teacher's role is to show paths to effective listening by training the students on these skills.
3. Listening is usually an interactive process. The listener does not always just listen, but he also responds to the speaker or asks questions for clarification.

There are two ways to approach listening texts: bottom-up and top-down processes. In bottom-up process, the listener gets the parts together so that he reaches the meaning. He gathers all the parts he hears and makes a meaningful whole. On the contrary, top-down process goes from whole to parts (Rumelhart, 1980). Listener makes use of his schemata and comes up with some hypothesis in the early steps of listening. Then, throughout listening, he confirms his predictions. Anderson and Lynch describe the bottom-up processing as "listener as tape-recorder", and top-down processing as "listener as active model builder" (Anderson & Lynch, 1988, pp. 9-11).

Research has shown that successful learners are autonomous, reflective, and are actively involved in their learning. These learners are aware of how learning takes place and the best learning strategies for themselves. With this understanding, the importance of learning strategies was recognized and teachers were suggested that they train their students in making use of learning strategies for more successful learning experiences (Wenden, 1985).

Mendelsohn (1994) believes that an awareness of the strategies for listening comprehension will form the basis for better listening courses. Similarly, Wenden underlines the need for strategy training and helping learners become aware of their own language learning experiences. He says:

There is a need for curricular strategies, techniques, and materials to provide training that would not only expand learners' repertoires of efficient strategies but also make them aware of various aspects of their language learning and critically reflective of what they are aware-in effect, to refine the reflective phases of their language learning (Wenden, 1983, p. 117).

In Turkey, students accepted to English-medium programs of universities need to attend English language classes at preparatory schools, if their English proficiency is not good enough to attend classes in their departments. Although they attempt to evaluate students' overall proficiency in English, not all proficiency tests prepared by the preparatory schools of universities test the listening skill, and consequently listening does not receive its due importance in preparatory classes.

With only limited training in listening, students start taking courses in their departments. When this happens, students may feel comfortable while reading texts and expressing themselves on paper, but when they listen to and respond to a text or a lecture, they experience problems in understanding and responding in English. As they attend classes, they realize that they cannot catch up with the instructor. As a result of their lack of training in listening, they usually suffer from not being able to take notes during the lectures in the courses they take, which in turn affects their overall success in their departments.

## **2. METHOD**

This study aims at answering the following research questions:

1. What are the participants' perspectives on the listening skill with regard to its role in learning English, whether they believe it is a difficult skill to acquire, and their self-assessment of their own competence in listening?

2. What makes listening a difficult skill as perceived by the participants?
3. Are the participants aware of some possible listening strategies and do they use any of them before the given training?
4. Do the participants believe that a possible training on listening strategies may help them be more successful in the Preparatory School and in their departments?
5. To what extent do the learners who have been trained in listening strategies actually use them while listening?

The study took place at the English Preparatory School of an English medium university during the Fall term of the 2002-2003 academic year. Forty-one beginner level Turkish EFL learners participated in this study. The participants came from two different classes, but both attended six hours of language instruction a day as part of the Preparatory School program.

### **2.1. Instruments**

The study was based on qualitative data. The data in this study were collected through two main types of means. The first one was a survey questionnaire that aimed to answer the first four research questions of the study. The second data collection tool was the think-aloud protocols obtained during a listening task given at the end of the training and used to answer the fifth research question. The questionnaire was given to all participants while the think-aloud protocols were conducted with only 21 of the students.

The questionnaire, consisting of 7 questions, was used to investigate the following: 1) the participants' perspectives on the listening skill with regard to its role in learning English, whether they believe it is a difficult skill to acquire, and their self-assessment of their own competence in listening, 2) factors that make listening a difficult skill as perceived by the participants, 3) whether the participants are aware of some possible listening strategies and if they use any of them before the given training, and 4) whether the participants believe that a possible training on listening strategies may help them be more successful in the Preparatory School and in their departments.

Since the participants were beginner learners, the questionnaire was given in the mother tongue of the subjects in order to achieve more reliable results. A latent purpose of using the questionnaire was to see if the participants already use any strategies or not prior to the training so the researchers could make use of the subjects' answers in designing the training sessions.

In several different areas of research, think-aloud protocols have been used extensively to depict subjects' mental processes (Ericsson & Simon, 1993; Hample, 2000; Laing & Kamhi, 2002; Oik, 2002; Pressley & Afflerbach, 1995). Think-aloud protocols in this study were used to get in-depth data on students' strategy use. After the researchers gave a listening test, the learners were asked to note down the strategies they made use of while they were dealing with the listening task. In other words, the subjects were expected to reflect their reasoning during the listening test on paper. The researchers' aim in applying the think-aloud protocols was to see if the subjects actually employ any strategies while listening. Although traditional instruments are useful for examining the strategies used by the subjects, they cannot capture and examine the strategies used during a real listening situation. Therefore, the researchers used think-aloud protocols because they believed that it would give them a chance to see exactly which strategies were used by the students while they were dealing with a listening text.

### **2.2 Procedures**

The questionnaire was given to the participants at the beginning of the study before any listening strategy training was given. Then the training started, and it lasted for 7 weeks. The training program on listening strategies were designed after consulting several sources on the issue (Dunkel, 1986; Jones et al,

1987; Mendelsohn, 1994; Mendelsohn & Rubin, 1995; Murphy, 1987; Rumelhart, 1980; Watts, 1986; Willing, 1987). Each training session lasted for one class hour per week. The training sessions started with informing the learners about the importance of listening in language learning and why they need to learn how to listen. The following session was devoted to discussing the characteristics of spoken language and a comparison of characteristics of the spoken and the written language. The next session aimed at making the learners aware of outside sounds and how they can help us in listening comprehension.

Another session focused on informing the learners about the strategies that they can use to cope with the unknown words. In the following session, how to activate our schemata in the listening process to be able to fill in the missing information that has not been explicitly stated was discussed. Another session was devoted to recognizing discourse markers which tend to occur at the beginning of a turn or utterance with different functions, such as signaling a transition or an interactive relationship between the speaker and the hearer. The next session involved a training on recognizing cohesive devices that indicate time relationships, sequence, spatial relationship, reasons or causes, examples, contrast, comparison, and evaluation, etc. In 4 of the sessions during this training, the learners were provided with listening practice which included the three stages of listening strategy application promoting the development and the use of cognitive strategies which are:

- 1) predicting or anticipating content of the foreign language message (pre-listening),
- 2) monitoring for discrepancies in messages received (while listening),
- 3) selecting relevant and ignoring irrelevant messages (while listening),
- 4) checking accuracy of comprehension (while and post-listening)

Finally, at the end of the training, think-aloud protocols were held while the participants were working on a listening text. The subjects were required to report which strategies they used while answering the questions in the listening task. The protocols were held in the subjects' mother tongue and translated into English by the researchers.

### 3. RESULTS

Data obtained through the questionnaire were analyzed in relation to the themes provided by the research questions of the study. The data were subjected to a content analysis. Descriptive codes were assigned to meaningful phenomena in the data in relation to the research questions.

#### 3.1 The participants' perspectives on the listening skill

The participants were asked how important listening was in learning English. The results obtained indicate that a majority of the participants think that listening is very important in learning English. Only a few participants believe the opposite (see Table 1).

**Table 1:** The role of listening skill in learning English

Answer	N
Listening is very important in learning English.	22
Listening is important in learning English.	8
Listening is not very important in learning English.	3
Listening is not important in learning English.	4

Another question aimed at finding out whether the participants think that listening is a difficult skill. As seen from the table below, a great number of the subjects believe that listening is a hard skill.

**Table 2:** Whether participants believe listening is a difficult skill to acquire

	N
Listening skill is <b>very hard</b> .	2
Listening skill is <b>hard</b> .	23
Listening skill is <b>sometimes hard</b> .	6
Listening skill is <b>not hard</b> .	4
It is early to answer this question.	1
No Answer	1

**Table 3:** Whether the subjects consider themselves good at listening

	N
I'm good at listening.	8
I'm neither good nor poor at listening.	13
I'm poor at listening.	13

The third item asked the participants to assess their own competence in listening. As seen in Table 3, thirteen participants stated that they were poor at listening, and another thirteen felt they were neither good nor poor at listening. According to the findings, only 8 participants believed they were good at listening.

When the subjects were asked to provide reasons which make listening hard, they came up with the following reasons (Table 4). The most common reason provided by the subjects was the pronunciation and the accent of the speaker. The students were usually unfamiliar with different pronunciation patterns and this led to a lack of understanding.

**Table 4:** Factors that make listening difficult as perceived by the participants

Frequency Rank	Reason	N
1	Pronunciation and accent of speaker	18
2	Rate of delivery	8
3	The effect of tape recorder	7
4	Lack of vocabulary	6
5	Lack of proficiency	5
6	Lack of concentration	3
7	Lack of practice	3
8	Situational factors	1

The second most frequently stated reason which students believed made listening difficult to understand was the rate of delivery. If the speaker delivers the message at a high speed, the subjects are likely to miss the message. Another major reason was the effect of tape recorder. If the sound quality of the tape recorder is not good enough for the students to hear the text, then this causes learners failing to comprehend the message. Some other reasons listed by the subjects can be seen in Table 4.

### 3.2 Use of listening strategies

An item in the questionnaire aimed to find out whether the subjects used any strategies while listening to texts before the given training. The results of the analysis showed that only eleven of the participants used some strategies (See Table 5).

**Table 5:** Whether participants use any listening strategies before the training

Use of listening strategies	N
Yes, I use some strategies.	11
No, I do not use any strategies.	22

The participants were also given a list of some specific strategies and were asked whether they make use of them while listening. Only 6 of the strategies were reported to be used by a few participants (see Table 6).

**Table 6:** Specific listening strategies used before the training

Strategies used	N
Paying attention to key words	3
Guessing the unknown words	2
Filling in the missing information	1
Concentrating on the text	3
Using the provided written material	2
Identifying the relevant points	1

Another item in the questionnaire aimed at finding if the participants think having training on listening strategies may help them be more successful in the Preparatory School of English. As seen from Table 7, twenty three participants think that a training on listening strategies may help them be more successful in the Preparatory School of English.

**Table 7:** Whether a training may help in being successful in the Preparatory School of English

	N
Yes, a training on listening strategies may help me be more successful in the Preparatory School of English.	23
No, a training on listening strategies may not help me be more successful in the Preparatory School of English.	3
I'm not sure.	2

The following item in the questionnaire aimed at finding if the participants think having training on listening strategies would help them be more successful in their departments. Table 8 indicates that twenty two participants think that a training on listening strategies may help them be more successful in their departments.

**Table 8:** Whether a training may help participants in being successful in their departments

	N
Yes, a training on listening strategies may help me be more successful in my department.	22
No, a training on listening strategies may not help me be more successful in my department.	4
I'm not sure.	2

### 3.3 The extent to which the learners who have been trained in listening strategies actually use them while listening

The think-aloud protocols provided information about the strategies that are used by the subjects while working on the listening test provided by the researchers. Examining the protocols, the researchers identified several strategies used by the subjects.

As seen from Table 9, making use of schemata is the most common strategy used by the participants. The second and third most common strategies are “predicting or anticipating the content of the message” and “selecting relevant and ignoring irrelevant messages.” The least used strategies are “making use of structure of the text” and “checking accuracy of comprehension.”

**Table 9:** Listening strategies actually used

Strategies used	N
Making use of their schemata	13
Predicting or anticipating the content of the message	11
Selecting relevant and ignoring irrelevant messages	11
Making use of discourse markers	7
Monitoring for discrepancies in messages received	6
Making use of cohesive devices	6
Guessing the unknown words	5
Making use of redundancy	5
Making use of structure of the text	4
Checking accuracy of comprehension	4

In the rest of this section, some sample protocols noted by the subjects are presented. The protocols were written in the subjects' mother tongue and translated into English by the researchers. Some sample protocols where the participants reported that they tried to *make use of the cohesive devices or redundancy* are as follows:

*"For this question, the speaker made use of 'in other words'. If you follow the text carefully after you hear that word, it is easy to understand the answer"*

*"For the 3<sup>d</sup> question, I made use of my vocabulary knowledge. As I know what "involved in" means, when I heard the word "interest" I could answer the question"*

Some participants stated that they tried to *guess the unknown words*, as displayed in the following protocol:

*"I first focused on the word "alchemy" and I waited to hear that word. When I heard it, I understood what it is used for and I answered the question"*

In some other protocols, the participants mentioned that they tried to *predict the content of the message* or they *checked the accuracy of their comprehension* as listening strategies:

*"I tried to predict and anticipate the content of the message because I couldn't understand the message of the text fully"*

*"If there is a point where I'm stuck, I do not spend too much time on it so I skip to the other questions"*

Another participant reported that he made use of his schemata:

*"I made use of my world knowledge"*

Analyzing the think-aloud protocols, it was seen that students were actually using some of the strategies they were trained in. A few students at the beginning of the study considered themselves good at listening. Not so many students knew about listening strategies and they thought that a training might help them be more successful both in the Preparatory School of English and in their departments. After the training, as seen in the think-aloud protocols, the participants became aware of the strategies and most of them started using them. The results of the think aloud protocols suggest that if students are given training in listening strategies, they will make use of these strategies while listening to texts.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

It has become increasingly important that we teach our learners how to learn. Therefore, “our efforts to teach students some ‘technical know-how about how to tackle a language’ are well advised” as Brown (1994) points out. Rebecca Oxford’s (1990) manual of learner strategy training is the most comprehensive and the most widely used resource for language teachers who would like to facilitate learner autonomy through strategy training. Oxford’s taxonomy can be taken as a starting point and practical techniques for training learners in strategy use can be created for specific skills and learner groups with specific needs.

In this study the skill of listening was focused on in isolation. It should be kept in mind, however, that language skills make sense when they are handled together. Therefore, listening and listening strategies may be taught in close connection with the other skills, especially the speaking skill.

When time needed for such training is concerned, it would not require instructors to allocate a great amount of time. The instructor can continue with the schedule of the day while she is covering the strategies as well. While this research was being conducted and the training was given, the school curriculum was successfully followed too.

However, a word of caution is due here. The results of this study may not be generalized to other learner groups or other settings due to a number of reasons, one of which is that the results are based on only a few participants. Therefore, the results of this study may be bound with the case studied and may be confined to the specific context. Still, the results of the study suggest that this training can be given at all proficiency levels. The researchers carried out this study with beginner students, most of whom started learning English that semester. If promising results can be obtained with the least proficient students, perhaps better results can be obtained with higher levels.

Considering the needs of students attending English-medium programs at universities, it is obvious that listening is a crucial skill. Thus, as teachers we need to be aware of the needs of our students and plan our lessons accordingly. As mentioned earlier, however, listening skill may be the least attended skill in many English language schools, especially in many Preparatory Schools of universities. Usually the students are not given training on how to be better listeners. Students in all Preparatory Schools of English-medium universities are proficiency exam-oriented, as they need to be successful on a proficiency exam before they can start taking courses in their departments. If the listening skill is not tested on the exam they need to take, then they do not want to spend time on listening skills in Prep. classes. Consequently, during the listening activities, the students have a tendency to ignore this skill. However, being proficient listeners in English is very important for them to be successful in their departments. It is a must skill in following the lectures, taking notes of lectures, and joining in classroom discussions, etc. Therefore, students should be guided to become aware of the importance of listening and trained in strategies they can make use of while listening. More importantly, to get a positive backwash effect on the curriculum and teaching, it is crucial that a listening component should be added to Preparatory School proficiency tests like some English medium universities have already done.

This research study may have several implications for further research. Another research study can be conducted to see how effective this training would be when used with upper levels. Moreover, a further follow-up study can be carried out with the participants who were trained on listening strategies in this study to see how many of them actually apply and benefit from these strategies when they go to their departments.

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