Insights into Young Learners' Metacognitive Awareness about Listening

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1. INTRODUCTION

Metacognition has been defined as the human ability to think about our own thinking. It is a theoretical concept that has been applied to education (Hacker, Dunlosky & Graesser, 2009) and more specifically to second language learning (Wenden, 1991). Its role in learning to listen has also been examined in terms of the strategies that learners use (see Macaro, Graham & Vanderplank, 2007 for a review) as well as in the context of metacognitive instruction, which develops learners’ ability to both self-regulate and self-appraise their learning (Goh, 2008, 2010). In spite of the growing interest in second language listening, research into learners’ metacognition has been conducted primarily among adult learners while relatively little attention has been given to young learners, who form a growing population of second/foreign language learners in many parts of the world today. The studies that have been conducted showed that this is an area worth pursuing for two reasons. First, young learners are capable of reflecting on and reporting some aspects of their metacognition, and therefore valuable data can be obtained directly from them. Secondly, findings about young learners’ metacognitive awareness can offer useful insights for teaching listening to young learners, which is different from teaching adult learners.

In Canada, for example, 10-12 year old French as Second Language (FSL) learners who reflected on their performance in listening tasks reported many strategies for accomplishing their listening tasks and overcoming difficulties (Vandergrift, 2002). The children also demonstrated awareness of the purpose and demands of the tasks, but appeared to be less aware of themselves as learners, as they commented relatively less on their perceptions of themselves as listeners and what they could do to improve their skills further. English learners in Singapore of a similar age group also showed awareness about the nature and demands of listening, and the strategies that could help their comprehension, but they reported a narrower range of strategies compared with their Canadian counterparts and demonstrated less awareness compared with older learners in other studies (Goh & Taib, 2006). Differences in the strategies used by good and poor listeners aged 10-12 were reported in another Singapore study, with the former using a combination of top-down (prior knowledge-driven) and bottom-up (sound-and text-driven) strategies while the poorer listeners relied mainly on the latter (Gu, Hu & Zhang, 2009). On young learners’ ability to work with peers on listening tasks, it was found that 11 year old learners could co-construct metacognitive knowledge about listening and learning to listen (Nathan, 2008). The present study aimed to continue in the line of metacognitive research on listening among young learners by investigating the metacognitive knowledge that a group of elementary school students had about their strategy use and the demands created by three different
types of text that they normally encountered in class. It also compared the similarities and
differences among learners with different listening abilities.

2. METACOGNITIVE AWARENESS

Metacognition is a psychological construct that represents an individual’s ability to think
about their own thinking, particularly the ability to monitor, evaluate and make plans for
one’s learning (Tobias & Everson, 2009). Differences in second language listeners’ meta-
cognition account for about 15% of the variance in learners’ listening ability (Vandergrift,
Goh, Mareschal & Tafaghodtari, 2006; Zeng, 2012). Thus, even though listening success
cannot be attributed directly to metacognition, it can help to explain in part how the more
successful listeners are different in their process of learning to listen. In this study, we
adopt the metacognitive framework for L2 listening proposed by Vandergrift and Goh
(2012) which was based on a review of the literature on metacognition in education and
second language learning, drawing particularly on the work of Flavell (1979), Wenden
(1991) and learner strategy researchers such as O’Malley & Chamot (1990), Oxford (1990)
and Cohen (1998). In Vandergrift and Goh’s framework, the term metacognitive aware-
ness is used to refer to the manifestation of the construct of metacognition by which indi-
viduals sense something about their learning as they are engaging in it, demonstrate
knowledge about their thinking and learning and apply strategies to enhance their learning
and communication in order to achieve their goals. Metacognitive awareness has three
dimensions: metacognitive experience, metacognitive knowledge and strategy use.

The term metacognitive knowledge was defined by Flavell (1979: 906) as “that segment
of your (a child’s, an adult’s) stored world knowledge that has to do with people as cogni-
tive creatures and with their diverse cognitive tasks, goals, actions and experiences”. It
comprises person knowledge, task knowledge and strategic knowledge. It is “part of long
term memory that contains what learners know about learning” and includes their personal
beliefs about language learning (Wenden, 1991: 45). The three dimensions of knowledge
are applied to listening as shown below by Goh (2008: 198–199).

Person knowledge

- develops better knowledge of self as an L2 listener;
- examines personal beliefs about self-efficacy and self-concepts with regard to lis-
  tening in a second language;
- identifies listening problems, causes and possible solutions.

Task knowledge

- understands the nature of L2 listening and the demands of the task of learning to
  listen;
- experiences mental, affective and social processes involved in listening;
- differentiates different types of listening skills (e.g. listening for details, listening
  for gist, listening to infer information);
- analyses factors that influence listening performance (e.g. speaker, text, interlocu-
  tor, strategy);
comparisons and evaluates ways to improve listening abilities outside formal instruction.

**Strategy knowledge**

- understands the role of different kinds of strategies for listening;
- identifies strategies that are appropriate for specific types of listening tasks and problems;
- identifies strategies that may not be appropriate for their learning style or culture.

The term *strategies* in the context of language learning refers to special ways of processing information that enhance comprehension, learning or retention of the information and include mental, social and affective processes (O’Malley & Chamot, 1990). Listening strategies are a sub-set of learner strategies which are used for enhancing learning and communication. The literature on listening presents us with different ways of describing listening strategies. One common framework consists of three main categories: *cognitive, metacognitive* and *social and affective* (O’Malley, Chamot & Küpper, 1989; Young, 1996; Vandergrift, 1997b; Goh, 2002). In this study, we adopt four broad strategy categories identified from the validation of the Metacognitive Awareness Listening Questionnaire (MALQ) (Vandergrift, Goh, Mareschal & Tafaghodtari, 2006: 450–451) where strategies were grouped according to the function they served, as explained below:

1. **Directed attention strategies** help listeners to concentrate and stay on task. These include getting back on track when losing concentration, focusing harder when having difficulty understanding, recovering concentration when one’s mind wanders and not giving up when one experiences difficulties. These metacognitive strategies represent the important roles played by attention and concentration in the process of listening comprehension.

2. **Planning and evaluation strategies** help listeners to prepare themselves for listening and to evaluate the results of their listening efforts. These include having a plan for listening, thinking about similar texts as a guide, having a goal in mind while listening, periodically checking one’s satisfaction with the on-going interpretation while listening and evaluating the strategic effectiveness of one’s listening efforts.

3. **Problem-solving strategies** are used for making inferences when listeners encounter unfamiliar words or do not hear some important parts and to monitor these inferences and other interpretations. These include strategies such as using known words to deduce the meaning of unknown words, using the general idea of a text to deduce unknown words, using one’s experience and general knowledge in interpreting the text, adjusting one’s interpretation upon realizing that it is incorrect, monitoring the accuracy of one’s inferences for congruency and comparing the developing interpretation with one’s knowledge of the topic.

4. **Mental translation strategies** assist learners in translating what they hear, be it words, phrases or entire utterances into their first language. These cognitive strategies are common among beginning-level listeners. Unlike the other three sets of strategies, mental translations should generally be avoided if learners are to even-
tually become skilled L2 listeners, as listening research suggests that skilled listeners use fewer or none of these strategies and experienced greater automatisation of input processing.

Of the four groups above, planning and evaluation, and problem solving are the biggest in scope and include strategies of cognitive and metacognitive nature.

2.1. PATTERNS IN STRATEGY USE

An issue that has interested listening researchers is a comparison of strategies used by successful and less successful listeners (Young, 1996; Chien & Wei, 1998; Goh, 2002; Vandergrift; 2003; O’Bryan & Hegelheimer, 2009) and their metacognitive knowledge about the process of listening and learning to listen (Goh, 1997; Vandergrift, 2002, Zhang & Goh, 2006; Cross, 2009). The review of research in the last three decades by Macaro, Graham and Vanderplank (2007) concluded that learners with different levels of success in their listening demonstrated different patterns of strategy use. This conclusion found further support in more recent studies such as Gu and colleagues’ (2009: 61) study which showed young learners with high English proficiency using “considerably more self-initiating, more planning (e.g. paying attention to specific aspects of language input or situational details; understanding better the conditions for successful completion of the task), made more guesses (inferencing) and more predictions, more often related the content to personal experiences, and more often tried to appreciate the texts”, while the low English proficiency learners were “more likely to have difficulties identifying a problem (evaluating); to ignore, postpone, or give up on a point that they failed to understand; to re-listen to a chunk that they did not quite understand; to repeat a word, phrase, or chunk verbatim; to use a great deal of bottom-up decoding; to engage in wild guessing; to fail to predict when they should; and to avoid embarrassment often by lying”.

Differences in strategy use have also been attributed to the effects of strategy instruction where language learners who have been taught how to use listening strategies had heightened metacognitive awareness and engaged in more appropriate use of strategies which could have led to better comprehension (Graham & Macaro, 2008; Cross, 2009; O’Bryan & Hegelheimer, 2009; Vandergrift & Tafaghodtari, 2010; Zeng, 2012). Patterns of strategy use may also be influenced by different types of spoken texts. Learners used different strategies when they were engaged in formal conversations compared with listening to recordings in class (Liu & Goh, 2006). Different types of listening texts have also been shown to be linked to listening performance, as task demands can vary according to text types (Berne, 1993) and perceptions of difficulties. Shohamy and Inbar (1991) found that some texts were easier to listen to, leading to better listening results. They argued that the orality (or features of spoken language) of the text could have affected the scores obtained by the participants and showed that consultative dialogues which contained more features of the oral text type were easier than news broadcasts which contained more features of the literate written text type. This is supported by Goh’s (1999) study which showed that learners found dialogues the easiest to understand, short talks moderately difficult and news reports the most difficult. Knowledge of discourse features of specific text
types could also influence performance as learners used text-type identification as a strategy for facilitating listening comprehension (Wolff, 1989).

2.2. INVESTIGATING METACOGNITIVE AWARENESS

Research that examined metacognitive awareness among listeners has traditionally used several methods for data collection. One such method is think-alouds or immediate retrospective verbalisations, where learners report immediately after listening to a chunk of text what they do to understand the input and the verbal data or protocols are used to interpret the strategies used (e.g. Young, 1996). Another method is through delayed retrospective verbalisations where learners reflect on a recent listening experience and explain this in writing through a diary entry or orally through an interview (e.g. Goh, 1997; Mareschal, 2007), or respond to a questionnaire (e.g. Vandergrift, Goh, Mareschal & Tafaghodtari, 2006). These types of data are introspective in nature (Faerch & Kasper, 1987) and can be obtained through adhering to a psychological framework of what information can or cannot be accessed, how cognitive prompts are used and when the information can be accessed (Ericsson & Simon, 1987, 1993). Introspection has been used in listening strategy research to elicit data mainly from adult learners, but it has also been used with some success among young learners, though not without its challenges. One such challenge is that some much younger learners (aged 7-9) needed extensive probing before they could verbalise their thoughts (Gu, Hu & Zhang, 2005). More recently, Cross (2010) combined diary studies with an examination of adult learners’ dialogues during listening tasks to study their co-construction of metacognitive awareness.

3. THE PRESENT STUDY

Although research on children’s metacognitive awareness about listening is growing, few studies have focused on the influence of different types of listening texts. The present study therefore aimed to gain further insights into young learners’ metacognitive awareness about one-way listening by eliciting their metacognitive knowledge, strategy use and perceptions of difficulty with listening tasks involving different types of text. It answered the following questions:

1. What strategies do young language learners report using when listening to English texts?
2. Is there a difference in the strategies reported as used by successful and less successful listeners, and in their perceptions of difficulty concerning different types of spoken texts?

3.1. PARTICIPANTS

The participants were 12 English language learners aged 10-11 from a government-funded elementary school in Singapore where English is the medium of instruction. Because of the bilingual policy in the education system the children had had at least 4 years of formal
English language instruction since they began first year in the primary school. Some had also attended kindergarten where English was used. The children were predominantly from non-English speaking homes where vernacular ethnic languages or a non-standard variety of English, or both, were spoken. The participants were first identified from an intact class of 42 based on their results in a listening test administered by their school before the study. Prior permission to obtain data from these children had been granted by the school principal and their class teacher. The students were randomly selected from the top 30% and bottom 30% of the class listening scores. The preliminary identification of these learners was confirmed by their English teacher’s assessment of their listening abilities as demonstrated in related language learning tasks and daily schoolwork.

3.2. PROCEDURES AND INSTRUMENTS

3.2.1. LISTENING TEST

The participants completed a listening test as part of an end-of-semester assessment. The test had the same format as the national examination, and consisted of 20 multiple-choice questions based on several listening passages. The passages ranged from approximately 220-340 words in length. During the test, the students listened to the recording twice and selected the best response for each question from three options. Each question was given one mark. For the purpose of this study, students who scored 85% (17-19/20) were considered to be “successful” listeners, while students with scores between 55% and 65% (11-13/20) were considered to be “less successful” listeners. No students scored below 55% in the class.

3.2.2. LISTENING PRACTICE SESSIONS

The children attended three 30-minute listening practice sessions outside normal school hours where they listened to selected texts. The texts consisted of narratives, news reports and dialogues but only one type was used in each session. These texts were selected because they contained words and phrases that the children might not have known, and even though the topics were not unfamiliar to the children, some of the information was. This challenge was needed to “bring strategies to consciousness in short-term memory” (Vandergrift, 2003: 472). If the passages were too simple, the children might process them in an automatized manner with no special effort needed. These listening sessions were conducted once a week by one of the authors, who was also a teacher at the school at the time of the study. At the end of each listening practice, the teacher went over the correct answers for each question as was the normal practice in class.

3.2.3. LISTENING DIARIES

Listening diaries are a way of helping learners to reflect on their listening experiences, and guiding questions can be used to direct their attention to specific aspects of their person, task and strategy knowledge (Goh, 2010). Although listening diaries are typically used
over an extended period of learning, they can also be short reflection pieces as was used in this study to capture the children’s thoughts on strategy use and perceptions of challenge. A variety of prompts were given to help the learners to think of their experience. They included: What were you thinking when you did the listening activity? Did you find listening to the passage easy or difficult? Why? What did you do to help you to get the right answer? What are some of the problems you had? How did you try to solve these problems?

3.2.4. QUESTIONNAIRE

A questionnaire was administered twice to find out about the children’s metacognitive awareness about listening – once before the three weekly listening practice sessions and again when they ended. The MALQ, a validated instrument, was selected as it was useful for eliciting self-reports of listening strategy use and self-efficacy (see Vandergrift, Goh, Mareschal & Tafaghodtari, 2006 for details). Self-efficacy is the belief that one can exercise some measure of control over their own functioning and things that happen around them (Bandura, 1993), and it can be revealed through person knowledge. Some of the words in the questionnaire items, however, were unfamiliar to this group of children and so it was decided that some changes were needed to ensure greater reliability in the information elicited. For example, teachers typically used the word passage to refer to the text that the children listened to in class and the term mother tongue to refer to the language of ethnicity or first language. This would ensure that the children could understand the items easily and had a familiar context in which to reflect on their listening and strategy use. The modified statements were given to another colleague to check that the original meaning of each MALQ item was retained. The questionnaire was then piloted with some children who had the same language and education background as the participants. The original and adapted items are shown in Appendix A.

3.3. DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS

Research question 1 focused on what strategies the children reported using and whether different strategies were used when they listened to narratives, news reports and dialogues. To address this question, the children were asked to write a diary entry at the end of each listening session to provide delayed self-reports (see Appendix B for a sample of the children’s reflection). A comparison of strategies used for the three types of listening texts was made. Data was also collected from the children’s responses to the adapted questionnaire to offer further information on strategy use. Items on mental translation and #3, #8 and #16 were reverse coded following Vandergrift, Goh, Mareschal & Tafaghodtari (2006). A selection of the data were checked by an independent coder for reliability in the coding. The second research question compared the strategy use and perceptions of difficulty of the two groups of learners. To address this question, the children’s reported strategies were examined according to their groups and their diary entries were further analysed for comments about challenges and difficulty faced. To ascertain which type of text presented the great-
In the most challenge to the learners, the number of times learners reported having difficulty for each listening activity was compared. Based on the frequency of mentions of difficulty or ease, the three types of texts were ranked “difficult”, “moderate” and “easy”. The children’s responses in the questionnaire were also examined for self-efficacy (items 3, 8 and 15) to obtain further insights into what was reported in the written self-reports. Excerpts of the children’s comments were selected to illustrate some of the findings.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

4.1. REPORTED STRATEGY USE

Diary entries showed that planning and evaluation were the most frequently reported strategies, followed by problem-solving and directed attention (see Figure 1). This suggests that in spite of their age, the learners were actively engaged in their listening process and exercising some control over it in order to make their task easier, supporting earlier studies by Vandergrift (2002); Goh and Taib (2006); Gu, Hu and Zhang (2009). Some prepared for their listening and also evaluated the effectiveness of their strategies unprompted. The use of problem solving strategies also shows the young learners’ attempt to compensate for problems such as unfamiliar words by making use of their prior knowledge to draw inferences or guess at meanings.

Figure 1. Frequencies of listening strategies reported by 12 young English language learners
Table 1 presents the results from the questionnaire responses before and after the listening practice reflections. They indicate strategies used and include person knowledge, which reflects the learners’ self-efficacy. The results have been organized according to responses. The responses were on a 6 point Likert scale with 5 and 6 belonging to the category of clear agreement and 1 and 2 belonging to the category of clear disagreement. As mental translation scores have been reverse-coded, the higher the indicated score, the lower its perceived use. As translation is considered to be an inefficient approach to listening, it should be avoided by learners if they are to become skilled listeners (Eastman, 1991, Vandergrift, Goh, Mareschal & Tafaghodtari, 2006). The table shows that translation strategies were the least used, although not completely avoided. There was, however, no report of mental translation in the diary data. This small discrepancy is similar to what O’Bryan and Hegelheimer (2009) reported about their four ESL learners, suggesting that while learners accept they do translate, it may not be a key strategy for some of them. It could be that responding to a questionnaire gave the learners the opportunity to scrutinize their own listening, and they became more aware of their use of translation in other circumstances. It is nevertheless unclear why these had not been mentioned even once in the reflections in the present study. It could be that translating was not something that the children felt was important enough to help them in getting the right answers, and so they had not reported it, or that they might have avoided mentioning these strategies because the learning environment they were in did not encourage the use of the students’ first language.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Successful</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>Less Successful</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>SD</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Overall/Composite</td>
<td>4.61</td>
<td>0.66</td>
<td>Overall/Composite</td>
<td>4.69</td>
<td>0.55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Directed Attention</td>
<td>5.08</td>
<td>1.12</td>
<td>Directed Attention</td>
<td>5.33</td>
<td>0.46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mental Translation</td>
<td>5.22</td>
<td>1.31</td>
<td>Mental Translation</td>
<td>5.55</td>
<td>0.50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Planning &amp; Evaluation</td>
<td>4.50</td>
<td>0.88</td>
<td>Planning &amp; Evaluation</td>
<td>4.30</td>
<td>0.78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Problem Solving</td>
<td>4.38</td>
<td>0.92</td>
<td>Problem Solving</td>
<td>4.41</td>
<td>1.03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Person Knowledge</td>
<td>3.88</td>
<td>1.31</td>
<td>Person Knowledge</td>
<td>3.88</td>
<td>0.75</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Successful</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>Less Successful</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>SD</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Overall/Composite</td>
<td>4.80</td>
<td>0.36</td>
<td>Overall/Composite</td>
<td>4.92</td>
<td>0.68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Directed Attention</td>
<td>5.62</td>
<td>0.37</td>
<td>Directed Attention</td>
<td>5.54</td>
<td>0.60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mental Translation</td>
<td>5.33</td>
<td>1.05</td>
<td>Mental Translation</td>
<td>5.22</td>
<td>0.62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Planning &amp; Evaluation</td>
<td>4.40</td>
<td>0.95</td>
<td>Planning &amp; Evaluation</td>
<td>4.63</td>
<td>0.93</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Problem Solving</td>
<td>4.66</td>
<td>0.69</td>
<td>Problem Solving</td>
<td>4.72</td>
<td>0.79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Person Knowledge</td>
<td>4.33</td>
<td>0.86</td>
<td>Person Knowledge</td>
<td>4.33</td>
<td>0.91</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
in the learning of English. However, it is more likely that unlike adult learners, the children’s first language was not as well developed and therefore did not offer them the linguistic resources for translation.

Some discrepancies have also been noted in the perceived use of the other three strategies. While the diary data showed planning and evaluation to be most frequently used, the questionnaire responses showed directed attention strategies to be top. The latter also had a high score of over 5.00 in all instances, indicating that the learners agreed very strongly that they made a special effort to concentrate and manage their attention when listening. This heightened awareness about directed attention strategies could have been due to the influence of their teachers who typically instructed them in class to pay attention, concentrate and listen carefully. The mean scores for the other two strategies were between 4-5, suggesting that there was only moderate agreement to perceived use of the strategies. One possible explanation for the difference in the questionnaire and diary data is that the guiding questions in the diary reflection got the learners to focus specifically on strategies that were used to enhance their comprehension. In addition, the news reports which many found to be the most difficult had likely stimulated the use of many such strategies, particularly planning and evaluation (see Table 2.) For example, the learners took extra measures to increase their chance for success by previewing the questions and checking their answers.

Table 2. Frequencies of strategies reported for each type of listening text

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strategy</th>
<th>NARRATIVE</th>
<th>NEWS REPORT</th>
<th>DIALOGUE</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Directed attention</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Planning and evaluation</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Problem solving</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>86</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

A further examination of the problem-solving strategies reported in the reflections showed that other than inferencing strategies, the learners across both ability groups did not report using any monitoring strategies for adjusting their understanding. Monitoring is a metacognitive strategy which requires an individual to consider the way they are thinking about a problem or process. For example, while the learners were busy making inferences, they did not step back as it were from this mental process to consider whether their inferences were in fact correct or acceptable. The lack of use of metacognitive strategies is common among language learners, but particularly among learners who were less skilled in their listening (e.g. Vandergrift, 2003). In the present study, the learners used planning, another metacognitive strategy, but not monitoring. Monitoring is a difficult strategy because it is done in real time, unlike planning which is done before listening begins. The children in our study may already be having difficulty with comprehending the listening input which they found difficult, and so their mental resources were spent mostly on figuring out the meaning of words, finding the right answers and simply concentrating on the text. As they were only 10-11 years old, the children were still developing cognitively and
were therefore not able to hold several perspectives in their working memory at the same time. Metacognition will improve with age (Flavell, Miller & Miller, 1993), but given what listening research has told us so far about the relatively low frequency of metacognitive strategies among adult language learners, it is clear that the use of metacognitive strategies does not automatically occur with age. Learners should still be trained to use metacognitive strategies so that the engagement of metacognitive processes can become an automatic process for them eventually.

Finally, it is also worth noting that the mean scores for all four strategies after the reflection sessions increased for the less successful group, while the scores increased for only three strategies for the successful group. This suggests that the post-listening reflections conducted over three weeks have helped to develop the learners’ metacognitive awareness to some small measure, thus supporting Wenden’s (1991) assertion that metacognition among language learners is a relatively stable construct but it can be modified through instruction. If more process-oriented sessions were conducted over a longer duration, we might have been able to observe greater metacognitive development among the children.

4.2. A COMPARISON OF THE SUCCESSFUL AND LESS SUCCESSFUL LISTENERS

4.2.1. STRATEGY USE

Table 1 in the previous section shows many similarities in the choice of strategies reported in the questionnaire by the two groups of learners. Table 3 below, which presents the frequencies of strategies identified from the diaries, also shows similar patterns across the two groups. Not only did both groups report similar strategies, the strategies that they had not reported were also similar. For example, under problem solving, none of the learners had reported adjusting their interpretation when they realized that their understanding was incorrect. The successful listeners did, however, report more instances of use of strategies on the whole and specifically for planning and evaluation. For example, some of them reported:

I read through the entire question and answer options before the listening comprehension began, so that I could listen out for the correct answers.

I read the questions first before I listened to the passage, memorized the questions in my mind and looked out for the answers.

These strategies would enable the learners to focus on important parts of the text in order to answer the questions. This was most likely because the children took heed of their teachers’ instructions on how to prepare for listening during an examination or for their listening exercises which were similar to the examination format. Previewing listening comprehension questions was frequently done as a test-taking strategy (Goh & Taib 2006). Although the less successful listeners in our study would have received similar instructions from their teachers, they were perhaps less able to do this as they could have been anxious or lacked confidence, thus causing them to be less able to manage their listening process compared with their more able classmates.
Table 3. Frequency of listening strategies reported by two groups of learners

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Listening strategies</th>
<th>Successful Listeners</th>
<th>Less Successful Listeners</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Directed attention</strong></td>
<td>(8)</td>
<td>(6)</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Concentrate and stay on task</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Planning and evaluation</strong></td>
<td>(27)</td>
<td>(20)</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Have a plan for listening: Reading questions first.</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>5</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Deciding between answer options</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>4</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Eliminating options that are not suitable</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>5</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Periodically checking one’s satisfaction with the on-going interpretation while listening.</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Evaluating the strategic effectiveness of one’s listening efforts and appraisal of whether comprehension goals are being realized.</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Problem Solving</strong></td>
<td>(12)</td>
<td>(13)</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Using the general idea / clues from a text</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Guess what they do not understand.</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>4</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Using one’s experience and general knowledge in interpreting the text.</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td>47</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>86</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Both groups engaged in some evaluation of their understanding and in directing their attention to stay on task: “I tried to listen very hard for the correct answer” or “I tried to listen harder to get the answers”. They also used inferencing strategies to solve comprehension problems with the help of contextual clues and their own background knowledge “I used the clues from the text that was given out” or “I try to solve the question by using the clues from the passage” or “I would solve the question by referring to the text that has been read out”. Osada (2001) suggests that less successful listeners in particular tend not to able to activate top-down strategies as they are too occupied with extracting information from the text; this seems to be the case with some of the learners in our study. The more successful ones reported slightly more top-down strategies that made use of their background knowledge to facilitate comprehension beyond isolated words to a more general and acceptable understanding of the message: “My knowledge from books and newspapers”. These results support findings by Hasan (2000), and are also consistent with Vandergrift’s (2003: 467) observation that skilled listeners processed “larger chunks and in-
ferred the unknown from the context using a top-down approach” in comparison to less skilled listeners who “tended to segment what they heard on a word by word basis...a bottom up approach”.

One possible reason why the children reported a similarly limited range of strategies is that listening lessons they had experienced so far focused too much on listening as a testing activity rather than a communicative event. There had not been any type of metacognitive instruction to develop the learners’ ability to reflect about the listening process and learn from their reflections, nor had there been activities that allowed them to experience the use of strategies so as to exercise greater control over their comprehension. Many of the strategies the learners reported tended to be the ones associated with exam-taking situations, where students were advised to focus their attention on the texts, preview questions before listening, check their answers when they have a chance to listen to the texts again, use different clues to help them to guess the correct answer and check their answers again before handing in the answer scripts. These planning and evaluation strategies alone will not be adequate when learners have to listen in different contexts.

Learners may have difficulty recognizing or understanding key words, and will need to use top-down strategies to achieve an acceptable interpretation of what they hear. This is perhaps the reason why several of the learners in their post-listening reflections referred to words that they had problems with: “I think the man was telling us news...bad weather...I did not know what ‘wee hours’ was...”. To solve this type of comprehension problem, learners had to rely on their knowledge of other parts of the text and their prior knowledge:

I tried to refer the parts that I could remember of the passage.

I tried to understand the story and visualized a little part of the story or what the question asked.

As can be seen in Table 3, the children used far fewer strategies of this nature compared to the test-taking type of planning strategies. It is also interesting to note that even though the learners encountered unfamiliar words, they did not report trying to translate the words, but instead used other ways of trying to make sense of what they heard.

4.2.2. PERCEPTIONS OF DIFFICULTY

Figure 2 shows that most of the learners found news reports the most difficult to understand, followed by narratives and dialogues, supporting findings from Shohamy & Inbar (1991) and Goh (1999). A comparison of learners showed that they were in general agreement, except for one or two learners in each group thinking otherwise (see Table 4).
Figure 2. Perceptions of difficulty of three types of listening texts (n=12)

Table 4. Perceptions of difficulty according to listening ability groups (n=12)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Narratives</th>
<th>News Reports</th>
<th>Dialogues</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Easy</td>
<td>Mod.</td>
<td>Difficult</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Able listeners</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Less able</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sub-total</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

When we consider the learners’ strategy use in light of their perceptions of difficulty, it becomes apparent that the learners were unable to harness the potential of strategy use effectively for understanding all three types of text. For example, some of the participants in Wolff’s (1989) study were using their knowledge of different text types to help them in their listening. As these participants were adults, they could have acquired more background knowledge about the structure of different types of text from their learning and social experiences. Vogely’s (1998) study highlighted that the difficulty in listening comprehension was partly due to the structural component of the text. The learners in our study were 10-11 year olds and their listening experiences consisted mainly of stories and conversations, while listening to news broadcasts would not have been an important part of their real-world experience. The only time most of these children encountered the news report genre was in English lessons in school. Therefore, their extensive knowledge of story grammar and discourse routines in conversations (in both English and their home languages) would have helped them to some extent in predicting what they would hear. The utterances in these two types of texts, particularly dialogues, would also be predictably shorter and syntactically simpler compared with news broadcasts which have qualities of written grammar and therefore have longer utterances with more complex syntactic struc-
tures. In addition to that, the contents would also have been less familiar to many learners. All these factors would have contributed to the children reporting greatest difficulty with news reports. Amongst the 12 learners, only one from the successful listener group mentioned using a strategy that was related to the form, or perhaps structure, of news report: “I was thinking about how the news report would be like”.

The questionnaire responses on person knowledge also helped to shed some light on learner perceptions about difficulty. Both groups of learners had the same overall scores (M=3.88) before the listening practice reflections, and showed a similar increase after the series of reflections and the whole-group discussion with the teacher (M=4.33). This shows that after the three sessions, they became more confident about their listening, and were less nervous and anxious. This was very likely due to the effects of the three practice sessions, the opportunities to reflect on their listening and learn from it, and the process-based discussions in which the teacher helped them to understand further the role they themselves could play in managing their listening process to influence the outcome. Increase in confidence, interest and motivation was also observed in other studies after learners experienced metacognitive instruction (Goh & Taib, 2006; Liu & Goh, 2006; Cross, 2010; Vandergrift & Tafaghodtari, 2010; Zeng, 2012).

5. CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

The young learners in our study demonstrated some metacognitive awareness about listening through reporting mental processes that took place during listening and describing some strategies that they had used. Nevertheless, there is still a need for teachers to develop their metacognitive knowledge about other processes of listening. As noted earlier, some of their strategies were test-focused, and these may not necessarily lead to listening skill development. It is therefore important for learners to develop their listening abilities in communicative contexts and employ strategies that are relevant to these needs. Learners also need to develop their knowledge about the structure of different kinds of listening texts, as well as developing better bottom-up processing abilities so that they can improve their word recognition and lexical segmentation abilities (Field, 2008). Given the evidence that learners find certain kinds of texts more difficult than others, it is important that the listening curriculum include opportunities for learners to work with a wider range of texts to prepare them for the communicative needs outside the classroom. It might also be useful to review the relevance of news reports for 10-11 year olds and substitute these with other forms of information reports instead.

Teachers need to heighten children’s awareness of metacognitive knowledge involved in listening comprehension when the children are working on listening tasks. More discussions could be held in class about listening from a metacognitive perspective to enhance learners’ awareness of the process of listening (Goh, 1997; Goh & Taib, 2006). The adapted MALQ was used successfully with the young learners, suggesting that teachers could consider using questionnaires as a way of helping learners to reflect on their learning processes. Questionnaires can also be used as a form of formative assessment of metacognitive development, which can help teachers to understand cognitive differences between successful and less successful learners. Diaries can also be used for the same purpose. By
understanding learner profiles and patterns in their perceived strategy use, teachers can better plan metacognitive instructional activities to enhance learners’ knowledge about learning to listen, and help them to use effective strategies for managing their comprehension and overall listening development (Goh, 2008, 2010).

If there was doubt as to whether young learners could introspect on their cognitive processes and report them, this study has provided further evidence to show that 10-11-year-olds can describe these thoughts and actions, as well as responding to simple written descriptions about listening processes in a questionnaire. That the children’s responses were also largely consistent across two forms of introspection further indicates reliability in the reports they made. As their self-reports were based on contexts where listening activities in class were similar to the examination format, further attempts can be made to elicit reports on strategy use in interactive listening in real-life communication or during communicative learning tasks (Farrell & Mallard, 2006; Vandergrift, 1997a). As our study showed that mental translation was not an important strategy for these English language learners in a bilingual context, it would also be useful to investigate the extent of translation being used by other learners in bilingual contexts, as the results can have implications for understanding bilingual language acquisition and language use among young learners.

This study was only exploratory in nature and has its limitations. The validated MALQ has been used successfully in a number of studies to elicit valuable data in adult learners’ metacognitive awareness (see, for example, Vandergrift, Goh, Mareschal & Tafaghodtari, 2006; O’Bryan & Hegelheimer 2009; Baleghizadeh & Rahimi, 2011; Zeng 2012). It, however, had to be adapted in our study for reasons already mentioned. While some readers may see this as problematic, the adapted MALQ has in fact provided useful information in the present small scale study. For future research on young learners’ metacognitive awareness, the use of a questionnaire for collecting quantitative data and listening diaries or other similar tools for eliciting rich qualitative self-reports is still recommended. Whether or not the original MALQ can be used with young learners may depend on the proficiency and background of the learners. For young learners who have limited vocabulary knowledge, some of the items may remain difficult, and a clearer context for thinking about their listening may also be needed. Caution must be exercised, nevertheless, when any adaptation is attempted. If too many changes are required, it would be good to consider whether or not the questionnaire should be used. It may be more useful then to find other ways to encourage young learners to reflect more deeply and widely in their listening diaries. Researchers can also explore using other means of self-reporting such as allowing children to draw pictures or using transcripts as a form of stimulated recall as they write their reflections. As young learners continue to attract the attention of second language researchers, it is hoped that more effort will be channelled to listening, and that the insights from this study will contribute to our understanding of children’s L2 listening.
REFERENCES


**Christine Goh** is Professor of Linguistics and Language Education at the National Institute of Education, Nanyang Technological University (Singapore). Her interests are in the development and assessment of listening and speaking, the role of oracy in thinking and academic learning and metacognition in second language learning. Her recent book *Teaching and Learning Second Language Listening* with Larry Vandergrift (2012, Routledge) proposes a metacognitive approach to L2 listening development and assessment.

**Kiren Kaur** is a Teaching Fellow at the National Institute of Education. She is an experienced primary school teacher and has been seconded by the Ministry of Education to teach language teaching methodology to primary school pre-service teachers in NIE. Her interests are in the development, teaching and research of oracy skills among English language learners in schools. Kiren is currently pursuing a Doctor in Education degree.

### Appendix A  Adapted Questionnaire

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Original MALQ items</th>
<th>Adapted for this study</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><em>(Vandergrift, Goh, Mareschal &amp; Tafaghodtari, 2006: 450–451)</em></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>1.</strong> Before I start to listen, I have a plan in my head for how I am going to listen.</td>
<td>Before I start to listen, I have to plan in my head for how I am going to listen.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>2.</strong> I focus harder on the text when I have trouble understanding.</td>
<td>When I have trouble understanding, I focus harder on the passage read out.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>3.</strong> I find that listening in French/English is more difficult than reading, speaking, or writing in French/English.</td>
<td>I find that listening in English is more difficult than reading, speaking or writing in English.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>4.</strong> I translate in my head as I listen.</td>
<td>As I listen, I change the English words into my mother tongue in my head.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>5.</strong> I use the words I understand to guess the meaning of the words I don’t understand.</td>
<td>As I listen, I use the words I understand to guess the meaning of words I don’t understand.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>6.</strong> When my mind wanders, I recover my concentration right away.</td>
<td>When I start thinking about other things, I quickly come back to listening to the passage.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>7.</strong> As I listen, I compare what I understand with what I know about the topic.</td>
<td>As I try to understand what I hear, I compare it with what I already know about the topic.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>8.</strong> I feel that listening comprehension in French/English is a challenge for me.</td>
<td>I feel that listening comprehension in English is difficult for me.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Original MALQ items</td>
<td>Adapted for this study</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>------------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Vandergrift, Goh, Mareschal &amp; Tafaghodtari, 2006: 450–451)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. I use my experience and knowledge to help me understand.</td>
<td>I use what I already know or learnt about the topic to help me understand.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. Before listening, I think of similar texts that I may have listened to.</td>
<td>Before listening, I think of similar passages that I may have listened to.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. I translate key words as I listen.</td>
<td>As I listen, I change some words into my mother tongue.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12. I try to get back on track when I lose concentration.</td>
<td>I try to focus back on the passage when I start thinking about other things.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13. As I listen, I quickly adjust my interpretation if I realize that it is not correct.</td>
<td>When I think that my understanding of the passage is not correct, I quickly change it.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14. After listening, I think back to how I listened, and about what I might do differently next time.</td>
<td>After listening, I think back to how I listened and about what I might do differently next time.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15. I don’t feel nervous when I listen to French/English.</td>
<td>I don’t feel nervous when I listen to English.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16. When I have difficulty understanding what I hear, I give up and stop listening.</td>
<td>When I have difficulty understanding what I hear, I give up and stop listening.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17. I use the general idea of the text to help me guess the meaning of the words that I don’t understand.</td>
<td>I use the main idea of the passage to help me guess the meaning of the words that I do not understand.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18. I translate word by word, as I listen.</td>
<td>As I listen, I change every word from English to my mother tongue.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19. When I guess the meaning of a word, I think back to everything else that I have heard, to see if my guess makes sense.</td>
<td>When I guess the meaning of a word, I think back to what I have heard from the passage, to see if my guess makes sense.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20. As I listen, I periodically ask myself if I am satisfied with my level of comprehension.</td>
<td>As I listen, every now and then I ask myself if I am satisfied with the way I understand the passage.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21. I have a goal in mind as I listen.</td>
<td>As I listen, I have a plan so I know what I need to understand.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
APPENDIX B  SAMPLES OF WRITTEN REFLECTIONS

Excerpt from a successful listener

I was thinking about the questions and which answer was most suitable according to the passage. I tried to understand the story and visualized a little part of the story or what the question asked. Easy! The story was interesting, funny and easy to understand. I used my knowledge from things I read like newspaper and books and pictures from books to visualize. I did not get any of the answers wrong.

Excerpt from a less successful learner

I was thinking and listening to the passage and think if there were any answers regarding to the questions. I found that the passage was manageable. I did not have any difficulty answering all the questions. I imagine the story into a real one and think. I use the cancelling method, for example if one I think is wrong, I’ll cancel it. I think it is because I didn’t listen properly? I guess I had problems. Some words are difficult. I had to guess the meaning of each word.