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Author(s)	Christine Goh Chuen Meng
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# ***Metacognitive awareness and second language listeners***

*This article reports on a diary study that revealed beliefs and knowledge second language learners had about their listening. From an analysis of the diaries of 40 ESL learners, it was found that many of them had clear ideas about three aspects of listening: their own role and performance as second language listeners, the demands and procedures of second language listening, and strategies for listening. The article discusses the implications of these findings for the teaching and learning of listening in ELT programmes. It calls for more discussion to increase learners' metacognitive awareness in listening, and argues for the use of listening diaries as a learning tool for this purpose.*

**Introduction** What knowledge and beliefs do learners have about learning to listen in a second or foreign language? Are learners aware of their mental processes during listening? How can we find out what learners know? This article is an attempt to answer these questions.

We may ask ourselves why it is important for teachers and researchers to understand what learners know about listening. There are at least three reasons. Firstly, there is evidence to believe that what learners know about their learning can directly influence the process and even the outcome of their learning (Palmer and Goetz 1988). Learners' perceptions of learning strategies, for example, will influence the kinds of strategy they choose (Nisbet and Shucksmith 1986). Secondly, as Wenden (1987) has noted, by taking into consideration their awareness and perceptions, we can get a better picture of the cognitive complexities that differentiate good and poor learners. She cites research showing that unsuccessful learners are generally less aware of effective ways of approaching learning tasks. Finally, the reason for focusing on listening is that, compared with other language skills, there are fewer insights about the process of listening and the way it is learnt. Furthermore, there has been much discussion about the important role listening plays in the development of a learner's second/foreign language (Long 1985). In view of this, listening certainly merits further investigation.

**Learners' metacognition** Studies suggest that language learners have definite beliefs about ways of learning a language (Wenden 1986, 1991; Wenden and Rubin 1987), and that they are also capable of becoming aware of their mental processes (O'Malley and Chamot 1989). This awareness, and these beliefs, are collectively called 'metacognitive knowledge', defined by Flavell (1979), who invented the term 'metacognition', as consisting

primarily of an understanding or perception of the ways different factors act and interact to affect the course and outcome of cognitive enterprises. He identifies three major categories among these factors: person, task, and strategy.

Wenden (1991) applied Flavell's typology to language learning and identified the same kinds of metacognitive knowledge among language learners. According to Wenden (*ibid.*: 35–43), *person knowledge* consists of general knowledge learners have about how learning takes place and how different factors like age, aptitude, and learning styles can influence language learning. Person knowledge also includes what learners know about themselves as learners, and the beliefs they have about what leads to their success or failure in learning a language. *Task knowledge* refers to what learners know about the purpose, demands, and nature of learning tasks. It also includes their knowledge of the procedures that constitute these tasks. *Strategic knowledge* is what learners know about strategies. More specifically, it is knowing about which strategies are likely to be effective in achieving learning goals. It includes understanding how best to approach language learning.

Wenden noted that there might sometimes be overlaps between task knowledge and strategic knowledge, because learners often needed to know what strategies to apply in order to accomplish a task. For the purpose of this study, I have retained all three categories of knowledge. To prevent any confusion between task and strategic knowledge, all observations by learners that are related to strategy use are classified as strategic knowledge.

***Investigating  
learners'  
metacognitive  
awareness***

Like all mental processes, learners' awareness about listening cannot be observed directly. Nevertheless, we can have access to this knowledge by asking learners to tell us about it. We can ask them to describe the way they listen and what they know about being a second/foreign language listener. This procedure is called self-reporting (Cohen 1987: 32, Wenden 1991: 77). One way learners can report is by keeping a diary where they record their observations, reactions, and perceptions. I call this a 'listening diary', distinct from more general diaries in which learners write about different aspects of language learning. Since learners focused on listening, I was able to get extensive information about their metacognitive awareness in this skill.

***The study***

The students in this study were from the People's Republic of China. Their average age was 19. They were enrolled on an intensive English language programme at the National Institute of Education, Singapore. Half way through their six-month programme, students were asked to keep a diary about their listening. To help them do this, I printed some short questions on paper. The questions asked them to reflect on specific occasions where they listened to English, and to report what they did in order to understand better. They were also asked to include their thoughts about learning to listen, and to say how they practised their listening after class. Each week, the students gave me one entry. They

did this for ten weeks. Forty of these diaries were analysed for the study reported here.

The students' beliefs and observations were classified under person knowledge, task knowledge, and strategic knowledge. To further organize the information revealed in the entries, I devised my own sub-categories for each of these three main ones. As I was not able to get a colleague to cross-check the results of my categorization, I left them aside when I finished. Four months later, I analysed the diaries again. Then, I compared both versions of categorization. In cases where the categories in the two versions matched, the results were accepted. Whenever they differed, I reconsidered them and decided on the more suitable category. Some categorizations were also rejected completely.

***Learners' metacognitive knowledge in L2 listening***

The students reported extensively on all three types of metacognitive knowledge. The items for each category and their sub-categories are presented below in separate tables. To illustrate some examples of these types of knowledge, I have included a number of extracts from the listening diaries, which are presented unedited, in their original form.

***Person knowledge***

The diaries revealed four sub-categories of learners' person knowledge. In total, I identified 25 types of person knowledge.

*Table 1:  
Person knowledge*

- 
- 1 Cognitive processes during listening**
    - a Stop and search for meanings of words
    - b Think of words and spell them out mentally
    - c Translate words into L1
    - d Reconstruct meaning from words heard
    - e Visualize all the words that are heard
  - 2 Problems during listening**
    - a Taking notes or reading subtitles of films interferes with processing
    - b Cannot distinguish important points
    - c Slow to recall meaning of words that sound familiar
    - d Do not recognize sounds of words which they know in writing
    - e Understand individual words, but do not get overall meaning
    - f Miss the rest of the text when there is a lapse in concentration
    - g Miss the next part when thinking about words or interpretation
    - h Cannot remember words/phrases they have just heard
    - i Cannot divide streams of speech into words or parts of a sentence
    - j Mistake one word for another similar-sounding one
  - 3 Obstacles to listening comprehension**
    - a Limited vocabulary or academic terms
    - b Phonological modifications e.g. tress, link-ups
    - c Particular types of accent
    - d Idiomatic expressions
    - e Types of input with an unfamiliar structure
    - f Inefficient memory
    - g Fast speech
  - 4 Obstacles to listening development**
    - a Own personality
    - b Social environment
- 

The two extracts below illustrate some types of person knowledge presented in Table 1:

#### Extract 1(Wei)

I listened to an English programmes this evening through the radio. Though the speed was not very fast, I didn't understand well. I often heard some words sounded familiar but I couldn't know their meanings quickly. I must think for a while and when I knew it, the programme already past a lot. Maybe I wasn't familiar with the pronunciation of such words because I only read or wrote but never listened to or spoke them.

The second sentence implies that Wei is aware that fast speech (3g) is an obstacle to her comprehension. She also knows that she is slow to recall the meaning of words (2c ) and that she often pauses to think about meaning (1a ), causing her to miss what comes next (2g). Wei believes that her inability to recognize words she knows in writing (2d) has to do with the way she learnt English in China.

Another student, Li, gives two reasons (4a, 4b) why she has not been able to practise listening to English outside of the classroom:

#### Extract 2 (Li)

The other problem I have is that the circumstance is not good for me to improve my English because many Singaporeans can speak Mandarin. Sometimes I want to talk in English, but maybe because my English is not influence [fluent] they use Mandarin. I know they are very kind and want me to relax. So I hesitated to ask them for speaking English because my personality, I'm not an active person ... To a certain extent I'm a passive person.

**Task knowledge** The students were highly aware of factors affecting listening comprehension in general. They expressed definite beliefs about the usefulness of different types of input for practice, and consciously compared listening to English with listening to Chinese. Altogether 17 types of task knowledge were identified under three main categories.

To illustrate some types of task knowledge, four extracts have been included below. In Extract 3, Zhong believes vocabulary to be a key factor in listening comprehension (1b) and sees the crucial role of BBC news programmes in developing his learning skills (2a).

#### Extract 3 (Zhong)

I plan to read more newspaper etc., and increase my vocabulary which is the base of listening skills. Certainly, the most important thing is to continue listening to BBC World Service news programme. I am confident that it can both improve my listening skills and news knowledge.

Tao also believes news programmes to be useful (2a) and describes a strategy he uses:

#### Extract 4 (Tao)

TV news has continuity because some things are broadcast frequently, so some new words become familiar to me. At the same time I kept reading newspapers every day, so some news had some idea in my mind and when the news was broadcast, I could recall it immediately.

Table 2:  
Task knowledge

- 
- 1 Factors that affect listening comprehension**
    - a Phonological modifications/prosodic features e.g. link-up, stress
    - b Unfamiliar vocabulary
    - c Different varieties and local accents
    - d Speech rate
    - e Types of input (e.g. natural speech, conversation, news broadcast)
    - f Good and bad times for listening
    - g Interest in a topic and purpose of listening
    - h Existing knowledge and experience
    - i Physical factors (e.g. noise, fatigue)
    - j Emotional states (e.g. pressure, nervousness, anxiety)
    - k Existing knowledge and past experience
    - l Length and structure of sentences
  - 2 Input useful for developing listening (and reasons given)**
    - a News broadcasts (continuity and repetitions)
    - b Songs (interesting and relaxing)
    - c BBC World Service radio programmes (variety )
    - d Programmes about language learning (informative)
    - e Videos (visual and contextual clues)
  - 3 Nature of second language listening**
    - a Similarities with listening to first language
    - b Differences from listening to first language
    - c Dependence on other language skills
    - d Need for active listening
- 

In the next extract, Hong comments on unfamiliar accents (1c). Her comments show her willingness to accept different accents, as well as her belief that listening comprehension can be enhanced through listener participation (3d).

Extract 5 (Hong)

Last week in Mr. C's class, when I first listened to him, during the first ten minutes of the class I felt it difficult to catch him because of his accent. But after that the accent is no longer a problem. I think in listening to English, the problem of accent is only temporary. We can overcome it quickly. The most important thing is that the speaker must speak clearly, and once again, as listeners, we should try to be able to catch the ideas of long sentences or long talk.

Jian also mentions accent as an obstacle, but he goes on to compare it to listening in Chinese (3a) and ends on a very positive note:

Extract 6 (Jian)

Last night I listened to BBC. There was a dialogue between two men. One man used a strange tone. I was not comfortable with that. I understood very little. Such things are the same as dialect used in China. Maybe if one contact these things often, then they will accept this.

**Strategic knowledge**

The students demonstrated an extensive awareness of learning strategies, both for assisting comprehension and developing their listening. They used top-down and bottom-up processing strategies. The former require listeners to make use of their knowledge and experience to enhance their understanding, whereas bottom-up strategies involve analysing words and sentence structures. In all, 21 such strategies were identified. Some students expressed caution and singled out four of these strategies which did not always work for them.

*Table 3:  
Strategic knowledge in  
second language  
listening*

- 
- 1 Strategies that assist comprehension and recall**
    - a Use visual clues, e.g. pictures, slides, body language
    - b Activate knowledge of context from titles, etc.
    - c Ignore unfamiliar words
    - d Take notes
    - e Recognize discourse markers
    - f Recognize tones/intonation features
    - g Guess or infer meanings
    - h Pay attention to repetitions
    - i Visualize the setting/subject
    - j Use existing knowledge to interpret
    - k Ask speakers to repeat
  - 2 Strategies for developing listening**
    - a Talk to competent speakers frequently
    - b Listen to different varieties of English and local accents
    - c Listen to all kinds of materials
    - d Improve vocabulary
    - e Develop specific listening skills
    - f Listen to different types of input and be familiar with their organization and structure
    - g Be familiar with pronunciation of words and learn about phonological modifications
    - h Listen to things one enjoys or is interested in
    - i Make use of subtitles in films to check interpretation
  - 3 Strategies that do not always work**
    - a Guess/infer meaning of words and phrases
    - b Use existing knowledge
    - c Ask speaker to repeat
    - d Read subtitles of films
- 

The following three extracts illustrate some types of strategic knowledge presented in Table 3.

Extract 7 (Xiang)

On Tuesday, we watched video at writing class. The name is 'Edward's scissors hands'. I like the movie. What I had done is to concentrate on the picture, not the Chinese subtitle. I tried to listen by myself, but when I couldn't understand what was happening, I quickly glance the subtitle, then drew back. Thus I could keep up with the plot. Repeatedly, I use this method to practise. I regarded it as a good exercise, and also, it is quite interesting, just like to test how much I could understand.

Xiang has developed a technique for using subtitles (2i) to enhance his comprehension and enjoyment of a film which he believes is also useful for testing his comprehension informally.

In the next extract, Ying realizes the importance of being familiar with phonological modifications (2g):

Extract 8 (Ying)

I believe I need to learn what the word sounds like when it is used in the sentence. Because sometimes when a familiar word is used in a sentence, I couldn't catch it. Maybe it changes somewhere when it is used in a sentence.

Finally, in Extract 9, Tang voices her concern about depending too much on guessing as a listening strategy (3a):

Extract 9 (Tang)

If I guess the topic that they're talking about, I can understand most of the words. If I do wrong to guess the topic, I'll not understand even one sentence. So I feel worried about it. My listening depends on guessing too much. If I couldn't guess the topic correctly, what could I do?

***Implications for teaching and learning listening***

The listening diaries demonstrated that the students had a high degree of metacognitive awareness. They were conscious of their learning process and the demands of listening to English, and had specific beliefs about the factors that could enhance or impair their listening comprehension. As a result, they were not only capable of observing cognitive processes in their listening, but also capable of verbalizing their theories about learning to listen in another language. I believe they did all this because keeping a diary provided the right stimulus for them to reflect on their listening.

In a study on the role of retrospective self-reports in learning, Matsumoto (1996), found that learners viewed diary-keeping as a useful learning activity because this raised their awareness of their own L2 learning. Listening diaries can therefore play a significant role, not just as a research tool, but more importantly, as a teaching tool for second language listening. Diaries can encourage learners to think about their own listening and consider ways of improving this skill. The pedagogical applications, however, are more far-reaching. Learners can be given opportunities to share with one another the thoughts and beliefs noted down in their listening diaries. Matsumoto also reported that learners found group discussions about learning extremely useful because they became more aware of their own and other students' strategies, beliefs, and attitudes. By finding out what other students are doing, learners can evaluate and improve their own learning practices.

Listening classes traditionally invest a large amount of time in getting students to listen and complete accompanying listening tasks. Although discussion takes place, it tends to focus on the content of the listening text. In a pre-listening discussion, for example, students brainstorm ideas related to the topic so as to activate relevant schema for the listening text. Post-listening discussions aim to reinforce students' understanding of the text they have heard. Such discussions are useful, but their outcomes are limited to the understanding of a particular listening text. We need to involve students in thinking, not just about the content of listening, but more importantly about the process of listening. More discussions in class about listening from a metacognitive perspective are called for so that teachers can enhance their students' awareness of learning to listen.

To encourage students to do this, we can incorporate process-based discussions as part of the course curriculum. Special time may be set aside for learners to discuss listening in general. We can ask them to present some special strategies and beliefs that they have written about in their diaries. Discussions can be focused by setting a theme, such as



'How I understand spoken English', 'How I practise my listening outside class', or 'The best way to develop listening'. The types of knowledge presented in this article can be used as points for these discussions. For example, students could consider the relative merits of the strategies reported in Table 3, select some that they have never used, and apply them in appropriate situations. They can meet again after a period of time to share their experiences and assess the usefulness of the strategies.

Another way of raising metacognitive awareness about listening is to expand the scope of pre- and post-listening discussions so that they include strategy use and beliefs relevant to that particular listening task. For example, after students have been told what they are going to listen to and the type of task they have to accomplish, they can discuss with a partner strategies which might be suitable for the particular task. In addition, they can be encouraged to anticipate any problems they might face, and to consider ways of minimizing the effects of those problems. After doing the task, students can talk about the appropriateness of the strategies they used, as well as factors that affected their comprehension. In this way, they get a chance not only to try out different strategies, but also to evaluate them. Furthermore, by encouraging students to reflect on their own cognitive processes, we are helping them to consider for themselves what leads to their success and failure in listening. They can then make better decisions about how to improve their listening comprehension.

**Conclusion** I believe most teachers agree that it is important to help learners become more autonomous (Ellis and Sinclair 1989, Wenden 1991, Dickinson 1992). Many students also want to have greater control over their own language development. Unfortunately, some of them lack adequate knowledge about how they can learn more effectively. The findings in this study clearly show that every student possesses some knowledge about listening in another language. Sharing this valuable resource helps everyone to benefit, and may help the whole class to make faster progress. The listening class should therefore make this sharing possible. When students become fully aware of the various aspects of second language listening, they will be well placed to become more autonomous listeners.

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## The author

Christine Goh is a lecturer at the National Institute of Education, Nanyang Technological University, Singapore. She is the co-ordinator of a large intensive ESL programme for overseas students. She has been involved in teacher education in Malaysia and Singapore for almost ten years. She has an MA in Applied English Linguistics from Birmingham University. Her research interests are L2 listening, learning strategies and metacognition, and the intonation of ESL/EFL speakers. She is currently doing research for a PhD at Lancaster University.