An Investigation of English Listening Strategies Used by Thai Undergraduate Students in Public Universities in the South

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Abstract

This survey research focused on investigating listening comprehension strategies used by undergraduate students, the differences in strategy use between more and less able ones and strategy use across universities. The subjects (n=146) were third-year English major students with a low intermediate level of listening proficiency, from four public universities in Songkhla, Thailand. Data were collected using IELTS Practice Test 7 to measure the students' listening ability and the Listening Comprehension Strategies Questionnaire adapted from the Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (Oxford, 1990). Findings indicated that the most frequently used strategy by all subjects was using background knowledge of grammar to help in listening (*cognitive strategies;* $\bar{X}$*=4.33*), while the least frequently used strategy was physically acting out what they heard to help memorize it (*memory strategies;* $\bar{X}$*=2.45*). On the whole, no significant differences were found in either individual strategy use or strategy category use between more and less able students ($t = 0.62$, $p>0.05$) and among the groups of students across universities. However, in detail, significant differences were found in three individual strategies, namely using prior knowledge (*cognitive strategies*), listening to English news (*metacognitive strategies*) and practicing listening and speaking with friends (*social strategies*). Significant differences in individual strategy use across the universities were also found: taking notes (*cognitive strategies*) and emotion control (*affective strategies*). Frequencies of strategy use in the more able students

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were higher than that in the less able ones. Implications are that more strategy training, especially cognitive and metacognitive strategies, should be provided to the subjects. Exposing oneself to real language use in media and communication with friends and others should also be encouraged. Activities for training in the use of note-taking and emotion control should be included, especially for the less able ones.

Keyword: Listening comprehension strategies

Background

English is widely accepted as an international language for communicating among people who speak different languages all over the world. In the present situation where technology brings people close to one another, face-to-face communication becomes even more important, requiring people to interact in real time, using the skills of listening and speaking.

Oral communication directly involves both listening and speaking—people need to listen to what their interlocutors say and respond to it. If they are unable to listen effectively, their communication will break down (Anderson & Lynch, 1998). Listening skills have become an important part of second language learning for over twenty years. However, Thai students are still unsuccessful in listening comprehension when compared to students from other South-East Asian countries (Wiriyachitra, 2002, 2003). Even though listening courses are continually introduced into language curriculum, especially at the higher education level in order to develop students' listening competence, insufficient listening strategy training is still a key issue discussed in a substantial number of previous studies.

1. Listening Comprehension Process

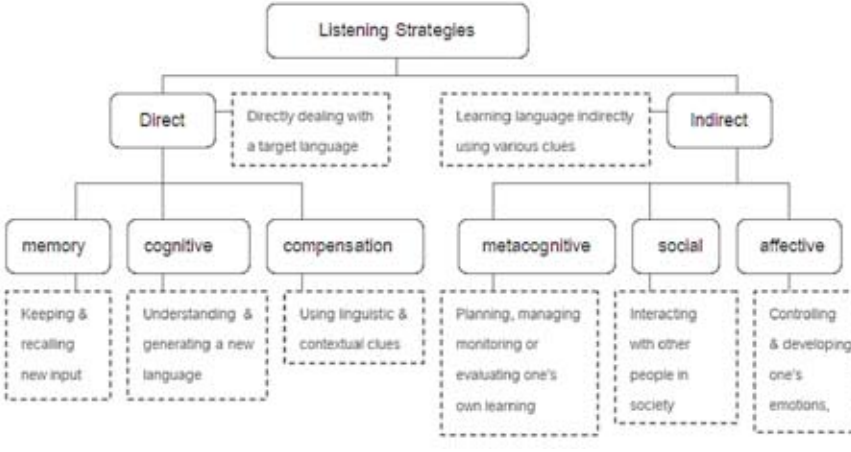
Listening comprehension, or speech perception, refers to active and very complicated mental processes (interactive and interpretive). It is the activity in which listeners need to concentrate on utterances spoken in a particular language, to recognize a certain amount of vocabulary and grammar structures, to separate each utterance into small meaningful units, to translate it with the help of stress and intonation and keep all of the components in

short-term memory before retrieving background knowledge or schema recorded in long-term memory to help understand the whole text in a particular context (Brown, 1994; Guo & Wills, 2009; Underwood, 1989; Vandergrift, 1999).

2. Strategies for Listening Comprehension

Listening comprehension—both reciprocal and non-reciprocal—is very difficult for language learners. When listening, they need to recognize what they hear and produce their own language to respond to it, but it is not possible to control the input delivered to them. Numerous features of spoken language conveyed instantaneously by the speakers such as different accents, speech rates, and the requirement of different background knowledge, can cause problems in listening. Apart from that, there are still many factors causing listening problems: listening difficulties themselves (e.g. linguistic features: phonetic, phonological, morphological, syntactic, semantic, pragmatic and language variations), inappropriate learning environments (monolingual contexts, unauthentic teaching materials or tasks, lack of interaction in English, a large number of learners per class, etc.), Thai students' unfavorable learning habits (e.g. being passive, being shy to use language, not enough responsibility to learn), and insufficient strategy training, to name a few.

Figure 1: Strategy System summarized from Oxford (1990)



'Listening strategies' or tools or actions learners employ to make their L2 learning easier, enjoyable and transferable to new input (Oxford, 1990), were proposed to help relieve the difficulties in listening. They are believed to be able to enhance learners' proficiency in learning other languages, and also develop their communicative competence and self-confidence. Strategies not only make the listeners better understand what they hear, but also help them deal with difficulties occurring in their listening tasks. According to Oxford's (1990) classification of language learning strategies, the strategies used in listening can be summarized as a diagram above.

Related Studies

1. Investigation of Listening Strategies

Since 1980, there have been a number of studies investigating listening comprehension strategies used by EFL and L2 learners to work out effective ways of facilitating listening tasks and help the learners overcome the difficulties they encounter. The result of a study conducted by Graham, Santos and Vanderplank (2008) and Holden (2004) suggests that learners understand what they hear well if they are aware of the effective ways of using strategies to deal with various tasks. Metacognitive strategies can lead to listening attainment when they work with cognitive strategies (Vandergrift,1999).

The study investigating the listening comprehension strategies used by EFL college students in Taiwan by Teng (1998) indicated that the subjects reported using different kinds of strategies. Compensation, cognitive, metacognitive, memory, social, and affective strategies were used in respective frequencies. Details of strategy used can be seen in the table below.

Table 1: The Listening Comprehension Strategies Used by Taiwanese Students

Category	Most frequently used	Least frequently used
memory	semantic mapping	physical responses
cognitive	practicing sounds and writing systems, translating and transferring	taking notes
compensation	using linguistic clues and other clues	-
metacognitive	paying attention and delaying speech production to focus on listening	organizing and setting goals
affective	relaxation, taking a deep breath, and meditation	taking risk wisely
social	asking for clarification	cooperating with peers or experts, and developing cultural understanding

In addition, a study on the listening strategies conducted by Seferrogue and Uzakgoren (2004) demonstrated the top three general strategies used by the participants: making use of background knowledge, predicting and selecting the relevant and ignoring irrelevant messages. Using text structure and checking comprehension accuracy were the least used.

2. Listening Strategy Use of Students at Different Proficiency Levels

Studies involving listening strategies used by learners with differing proficiency have been widely conducted. Chang (2009), Shang (2008), and Teng (1998) found that the less efficient students used cognitive and memory strategies most frequently, and social strategies least frequently. The more efficient ones used strategies more often. All categories of strategies except affective strategies were employed, with more use of compensation. They also used top-down (the way to understand what is heard by mainly relying on background knowledge or common sense) and metacognitive strategies which are closely related to the learners' listening ability. The less efficient denied employing top-down strategies, but relied on bottom-up strategies (the way to understand what is heard based on a spoken text by recognizing language features such as combination of sounds, words or grammar.) instead (Graham, Santos & Vanderplank, 2008; Lui, 2008). It can be said that listening ability has an effect on the quantity and the frequency of strategy use (Chang, 1998). The results coincide with those of Tang's (2006) study, investigating listening strategies used among non-English-major postgraduates.

A study investigating the use of listening strategies by students in five Mexican universities conducted by Chulim (2008) showed that the most frequent use of strategies was focusing on specific information, while taking notes and using prior knowledge were used the least. Significant differences were not found across universities in listening strategies used, but were found across levels of English.

This study aimed to explore listening strategies used by undergraduate students at four public universities in the south of Thailand to find out differences in the choice of strategies between two different ability groups of a low intermediate level of listening proficiency and the strategy use of the students across the universities. The results of this study are expected to be beneficial for further research and pedagogical applications in terms of developing learners' abilities in using effective and appropriate strategies.

Definitions of Terms

1. Students with low intermediate level of listening proficiency: the students who had test scores ranging from 0 to 21 out of 40 measured by IELTS Listening marking schemes
2. MAS (More Able Students): the top 27% of the total students in a sample group who had the highest listening test scores
3. LAS (Less Able Students): the bottom 27% of the total students in a sample group who had the lowest listening test scores
4. Individual strategies: a single strategy item separated out from the 6 main strategy types (SILL) suggested by Oxford (1990)
5. Strategy category: a group of strategies (SILL) categorized by Oxford (1990), including 6 main types: memory, cognitive, compensation, metacognitive, social and affective

Research Questions (RQ)

1. What are the 10 top and bottom individual strategies reported as being used by the subjects?
2. Are there significant differences in strategy use found between MAS and LAS?
3. Are there any differences in the choice of individual strategies among the groups of students across the universities?

Subjects

The population was 198 third-year undergraduate students, majoring in English from four public universities (U1, U2, U3, and U4) in Songkhla Province, Thailand. The simple random sampling method was used, and section 1 from each university was selected totaling 146 students. The students took the listening test and the results were used to divide them into higher and lower ability groups using the 27% technique. 39 students were in the higher ability group and 39 in the lower one. However, all 146 were used in the comparison of strategies used among students from different universities.

Instruments

1. Listening Test

The test was merely used to measure students' listening ability so that they could be divided into two different ability groups. It was taken from a listening section of Cambridge IELTS practice test 7 (Cambridge, 2009). It consisted of 40 questions.

2. Listening Strategy Questionnaire

The 40 strategy items directly related to listening skills from the Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL version 7.0 for ESL/EFL learners) were used to examine the frequency of strategy use. The questionnaire (see appendix1) was composed of two parts: personal background information and 40 listening strategy items to rate the frequencies of strategy use with five Likert-scale responses, ranging from 1-5 (1=never, 2=seldom, 3=sometimes, 4=usually, 5=always) (Oxford, 1990). They were divided into 6 categories: memory strategies (items 1-3), cognitive strategies (items 4-17), compensation strategies (items 18-24), metacognitive strategies (items 25-33), social strategies (items 34-38), and affective strategies (items 39-40). The questionnaire was translated into Thai to ensure full comprehension of the questions, and strategy items and the accuracy of results. It was piloted with fourth year students, majoring in English to measure its reliability. The Cronbach alpha reliability test result was 0.89.

Data Collection

The questionnaire was launched before the test to ensure that the reported use of strategies was ones used in general situations, not specific only to the test context. Before completing the questionnaire, the subjects were informed of the objectives of collecting the data, the detailed description of the questionnaire, plus instructions and time requirement of 30 minutes.

After the questionnaire completion, the listening test was administered with a clear description and instructions. The audio CD was played twice due to the fact that most of the students were unable to catch the meanings or to answer the questions. The time limit on the test was approximately 30 minutes.

Playing the listening text twice led to several positive effects on the test-takers. Numerous studies supported that listening to texts twice was

advantageous—making difficult and authentic texts much easier to understand, especially for lower-ability test takers, helping fill comprehension gaps in a crowded room, coping with bad sound quality, disturbing noises, etc. (Lidget Green, Inc., 2012). This can make up for the chances in real life communication to ask for repetitions or repairs.

Findings and Discussion

RQ1: What are the top and the bottom 10 strategies reported as being used by the students?

Based on the mean scores of the frequency of each strategy item used by the subjects, the top 10 strategies used are presented in the table below.

Table 2: 10 Strategies Most Frequently Employed

#	n	Strategies	$\bar{X}$	SD
9	78	I use my previous knowledge of grammar to help listening. (cognitive)	4.33	0.73
11	78	I try to translate what I am listening to into Thai. (cognitive)	4.08	0.75
26	78	I try to pay full attention to and concentrate on what I am listening to, especially when I do not understand it. (metacognitive)	3.97	0.92
21	78	In interactive listening, i.e, conversation, classroom lecture, presentation, I make a guess at what I am listening to by interpreting the speaker's tone of voice, facial expressions, or gestures. (compensation)	3.92	0.70
39	78	I try to relax myself, breathe deeply, meditate, and clear my mind while listening. (affective)	3.88	0.82
40	78	I encourage myself before doing listening tasks. (affective)	3.88	0.97
7	78	I try to grasp the main idea while listening. (cognitive)	3.86	0.85
16	78	I try to use my previous knowledge and my common sense to help me interpret a spoken text. (cognitive)	3.83	0.84
8	78	I try to listen for the main idea before focusing on other small details. (cognitive)	3.82	0.70
31	78	I listen to various kinds of music. (metacognitive)	3.81	0.67

The findings pointed out that the four strategy categories frequently applied by all students were respectively cognitive strategies (using grammar, translating into L1, grasping the main idea and retrieving prior knowledge), metacognitive strategies (paying attention to the input, listening to music in English), affective strategies (relaxing and encouraging themselves), and compensation strategies (guessing the meaning from tone of voices, facial expressions or gestures. The results corresponded with Teng's (1998) and Tang's (2006) studies, reporting that cognitive strategies were used most frequently (e.g. translating and transferring the spoken messages into L1), followed by metacognitive, affective and social strategies, while physical responses which belonged to the memory strategy category were seldom used.

It can be implied that the students considered grammar as the most essential component to comprehend the new language, so they mostly relied on using grammar or knowledge of structures to help in listening. Moreover, the results showed that translating what was heard into L1 was second most frequently used. It may be possible that the subjects were familiar with learning a language through the emphasis on grammatical rules and translation, so they might automatically use grammar, and knowledge of structures to translate what they heard back into their first language in order to get the meaning. This may suggest that the grammar translation approach still plays an important role in teaching and learning. However, using grammar to help comprehend the listening test may not be bad as Fang (2008) suggests that grammatical knowledge is very crucial to enhance listening ability since it helps listeners better remember utterances and recognize the connections between words which are finally combined into meaningful structures. Yet, Seferrogue & Uzakgoren's (2004) findings showed that text structures were rarely used among listeners, while background knowledge was frequently used as one of the top three strategies. On the other hand, the 10 strategies least used by the subjects are shown in the table below.

Table 3: 10 Strategies Least Frequently Employed

#	n	Strategies	$\bar{X}$	SD
3	78	I physically act out what I hear to help me remember. (memory strategy)	2.45	1.00
10	78	I break down a new word, phrase, sentence, or paragraph into its component parts before finding the meaning of the whole word. (cognitive strategy)	2.60	0.98
5	78	I practice listening to English pronunciation and intonation from audio CDs. (cognitive strategy)	2.62	0.89
25	78	Before taking a classroom lecture, taking a listening exam or listening to a presentation, I prepare myself for the listening tasks by reviewing the contents, vocabulary or exercises. (metacognitive strategy)	2.64	0.93
27	78	I decide in advance to selectively listen to some parts of the whole text. (metacognitive strategy)	2.65	1.00
32	78	I listen to the news in English. (metacognitive strategy)	2.70	0.73
14	78	I try to make summaries of what I am listening. (cognitive strategy)	2.90	0.89
30	78	I watch English movies without subtitles. (metacognitive strategy)	2.91	0.74
12	78	I try to interpret what I am listening to in English only. (cognitive strategy)	2.97	0.89
22	78	I make a guess at what I am listening to by using background noise. (compensation strategy)	3.05	0.99

The findings indicated that of the ten strategy items, (#3) physically acting out what one hears to help one remember (memory strategy) was used least by the subjects. This might be possible that the students were more familiar with the grammar-translation method than the total physical response method (TPR) which focuses on kinesthetic motion or carrying out physical activities rather than listening to a lecture, so they may not know how to use it.

In categories, metacognitive strategies were found to be the least frequently used as follows: (#25) preparing themselves by reviewing contents relevant to the listening tasks ($\overline{X}$=2.64, SD=0.93); (#27) deciding in advance to listen selectively to some parts of the whole text ($\overline{X}$=2.65, SD=1.00); (#32) listening to the news ($\overline{X}$=2.70, SD=0.73); and (#30) watching English movies without subtitles ($\overline{X}$=2.91, SD=0.74). This reflected that the students not only

had insufficient preparation for listening tasks, but also inadequate listening practice and insufficient exposure to English outside of class. This result contrasted with the research findings by Lui (2008) and Graham Santos & Vanderplank (2008). This was probably because the subjects in this study were in the low intermediate level. Hence, they should be provided with better strategy instruction opportunities since it is believed that metacognitive strategies have highly positive influence on listening competence (Holden, 2004; Vandergrift, 1999).

RQ2: Are there significant differences in strategy use found between MAS and LAS?

The overall mean scores of frequencies in listening strategy category use among MAS ($\overline{X}$ =3.45, SD= 0.53) were higher than those of LAS ($\overline{X}$ =3.36, SD= 0.56), but not at a significant level (*t = 0.62*, p>0.05). As shown in table 4, MAS used memory, compensation, metacognitive, social, and affective strategies more frequently than LAS, but cognitive strategies were used by LAS slightly more frequently. The findings agreed with Teng (1998) and Chang (2007, 2009), who suggested that differences of listening abilities at certain levels can lead to differences in frequency and quantity of listening strategy use. In other words, not using strategies as frequently and effectively as they should might cause differences in students' listening ability levels. In addition, in line with Teng's and Chang's studies, the results of the current study, showing that MAS employed most of the strategies more frequently than LAS did, might suggest that learners' listening ability could be improved if they tried to use strategies as frequently as possible, and learned how to utilize them most effectively instead of using large quantities, but the use was not appropriate for particular listening tasks.

Table 4: Mean Scores of Frequencies in the Use of Listening Strategy Categories

LS	MAS		LAS		*t*	Sig.
	$\bar{X}$	SD	$\bar{X}$	SD		
MEMORY	3.24	0.61	3.07	0.62	1.22	0.23
COGNITIVE	3.43	0.34	3.44	0.39	-0.14	0.89
COMPENSATION	3.44	0.48	3.39	0.51	0.42	0.67
METACOGNITIVE	3.23	0.31	3.14	0.51	0.93	0.36
SOCIAL	3.41	0.62	3.34	0.58	0.85	0.65
AFFECTIVE	3.96	0.82	3.81	0.77	0.45	0.40
Total	**3.45**	**0.53**	**3.36**	**0.56**	**0.62**	**0.53**

Shown in Talk 5, significant differences between the two gruops were found in the 3 strategies which MAS reported employing more frequently than LAS did: using background knowledge and common sense to interpret the meaning **(t = 2.40**, $p<0.05$), listening to news in English **(t = 2.03**, $p<0.05$), and practicing English listening and speaking with friends **(t = 2.11**, $p<0.05$).

Table 5: Significant Differences in Listening Strategy Use between MAS and LAS

Item	Strategies	MAS		LAS		*t*	Sig.
		$\bar{X}$	SD	$\bar{X}$	SD		
16	I try to use my previous knowledge and my common sense to help interpreting a spoken text. (cognitive strategy)	4.05	0.70	3.61	0.92	2.40	0.02
32	I listen to news in English. (metacognitive strategy)	2.87	0.67	2.54	0.76	2.03	0.05
37	I practice listening and speaking in English with my friends. (social strategy)	3.38	0.81	2.97	0.90	2.11	0.04

Based on the results, it could be considered that MAS made more effort to retrieve their previous knowledge and used common sense to facilitate listening (top-down strategies), and had more integrative motivation to listen to news in English and to practice interactive listening with their friends. This can be the reason why MAS had better listening ability than LAS. Those strategies probably made significant contributions to learners' listening abilities.

RQ3: Are there any differences in choice of strategies among the groups of students across the universities?

One-Way ANOVA analysis results showed no significant differences in the overall frequency of strategy use both in separate items and in categories across the groups of students from each university, but significant differences were found in two strategies: strategy 13, taking notes while listening to help comprehension (cognitive strategy) ($F(3,141) = 4.986$, $p = .00$) and strategy 39, taking a deep breath, relaxing and meditation (affective strategy) ($F(3,142) = 3.432$, $p = .02$) as shown in Table 6.

Table 6: One-Way ANOVA Analysis of Listening Strategy Use across the Groups of Students from the Four Universities

Strategies		**Sum of Squares**	**df**	**Mean Square**	**F**	**Sig.**
Taking notes while listening	Between Groups	12.31	3	4.104	4.986	**0.00****
	Within Groups	116.06	141	0.823		
	Total	128.37	144			
Trying to relax myself, breathe deeply, meditate, and clear my mind while listening	Between Groups	8.12	3	2.705	3.432	**0.02***
	Within Groups	111.95	142	0.788		
	Total	120.06	145			

** The mean difference is significant at the .01 level.

* The mean difference is significant at the .05 level.

The results also showed 2 pairs of significant differences in using strategy 13 across the universities: U2 vs. U1 ($p<0.05$) and U2 vs. U3 ($p<0.05$). One pair was found in using strategy 39: U1 vs. U3 ($p<0.05$). Strategy 13 was employed by U2 students the most ($\overline{X}=4.15$), followed by those in U3 ($\overline{X}=3.55$), and U1 ($\overline{X}=3.38$) respectively. Strategy 39 was used by U1 students ($\overline{X}=4.05$) more than ones in U3 ($\overline{X}=3.63$) as shown in Table 7.

Table 7: Multiple Comparisons (Scheff) for Listening Strategy Use across the Groups of Students from the Four Universities

Strategies	Universities		$\bar{X}$	SD	Sig.
(13) Taking notes while listening	U1	U2	**-0.76**	**0.24**	**0.02**
	U3	U2	**-0.60**	**0.19**	**0.02**
(39) Trying to relax, breathe deeply, meditate, and clear mind while listening	U1	U3	**0.71**	**0.24**	**0.03**

The mean difference is significant at the .05 level.

Only 3 groups of students showed significant differences in the use of strategies. The students from U4 who were considered having the lowest proficiency did not report using any particular strategies, so significant differences did not result within this group.

The results reflected that taking notes and lowering anxiety probably had positive effects on listening comprehension. This can be supported by the listening test scores. The highest mean scores were obtained by U1 students ($\overline{X}$=16.90), followed by those from U2 ($\overline{X}$=15.60), U3 ($\overline{X}$=12.66) and U4 ($\overline{X}$=9.88) respectively. This means that the students who got high-range scores might gain benefit from taking notes and also lowering anxiety to help comprehend listening input.

Although the U2 students who got lower test scores than those in U1 reported using strategy 13—taking notes most frequently, the mean scores of strategy 39—trying to lower anxiety, were found to be higher among U1 students. It is possible that when U1 students took notes and tried to lower their anxiety at the same time, they could comprehend more. This is in concordance with Boch & Piolat (2005) and Neville (2006), whose studies on note-taking strategies stated that note-taking helps learners recall and concentrate on what they have learnt, understand the piece of information they receive and keep particular information longer. Lowering anxiety, on the other hand, could mean low affective filter (Burden, 2006) and hence making the way for more efficient listening.

Conclusion and Recommendations

This study aimed to examine the use of listening strategies among different ability groups of Thai undergraduate students in terms of frequency and types of strategies used. The findings indicated that cognitive strategies, especially using grammatical knowledge to help listening, were used most frequently, while metacognitive strategies and physically acting out what was heard were used the least. The results also revealed no significant differences in the overall individual strategies and the strategy categories employed between MAS and LAS, but significant differences were found in three individual strategies. There were also no significant differences in the strategies used across the universities, except for taking notes while listening and trying to lower anxiety. However, the mean scores of frequencies in using strategy categories among MAS were higher than LAS.

The findings are expected to be beneficial for teachers to help students become aware of the significance of listening and benefits of using the right strategies with the right tasks. They can also serve as guidelines for teachers who would like to provide strategy training in English listening instruction, especially for college students who need sufficient language skills for both social and academic purposes. Based on the results obtained from the study, it is recommended that cognitive (e.g. using grammar or prior knowledge, and summarizing) and metacognitive (e.g. practicing intonation and pronunciation, practicing listening to news, and reviewing in advance) strategy training should be underlined since they have great influence on listening comprehension. Moreover, taking notes while listening and lowering anxiety, which were indicated to be beneficial for the students in comprehending listening texts, should also be emphasized.

As can be seen, many strategies seemed to contribute to the students' listening comprehension. Some strategies can be effectively used in a specific context. For example, taking notes or summarizing may not be effectively used in real time communication (social contexts), but may work well in academic ones. Hence, strategy training should include various strategies that can be put into use at proper time in order to make listening as easy as possible for the students, especially those with lower language ability.

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