

A STUDY ON TEST-TAKING STRATEGIES FOR LISTENING TESTS BY ENGLISH MAJORS

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Abstract: This study was conducted to explore the awareness of English majors from a university regarding their employment of test-taking strategies during listening tests and to identify their most frequently used test-taking strategies. Two hundred forty-two English majors participated in the study. The data were gathered through two main instruments: questionnaire and interview. The study's findings indicate that the majority of participants had a favorable attitude toward using test-taking strategies in four areas: test performance, listening comprehension, degree of concentration, and anxiety. It was also found that employing test-taking strategies had the most significant impact on students' test performance among the four factors considered. Besides, metacognitive strategies were reported to be the most frequently used among the six groups of strategies that adhered to Oxford's (1996) taxonomy. However, students held an inconsistent view regarding the use of L1 during listening tests. Based on the findings of this study, some implications concerning test-taking strategies use were suggested for students taking listening tests.

Keywords: English majors, listening skill, test-taking strategy.

1. INTRODUCTION

Tests are commonly regarded as the most widely utilized assessment method in the educational systems throughout the world. Particularly concerning the tertiary level, this form of assessment seems generally to carry the highest proportion of the grade for students. However, there is knowledge deficiency of how the respondents' mental process operates while taking the test (Cohen, 2006).

At the university level, listening skill is one among the four language skills, including listening, reading, speaking, and writing that second-year students are expected to achieve the level of 4/6 in VSTEP (Vietnamese Standardized Test of English Proficiency), which is equivalent to level B2 in the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR). Obviously, listening is one of the compulsory courses for English majors. For a listening test, students are usually given 40 minutes to complete three main parts with a total of twenty-five questions with the increasing degree of difficulty from basic to advanced. However, doing listening tests has proved to be challenging for students. Thus, the need to employ strategies during the listening tests is essential and the investigation into this topic is of significance to contribute to the literature concerning the test-taking strategies from the test-takers perspective. In addition, findings about the

frequently utilized test-taking strategies concerning listening tests of English majors will provide pedagogical implications to enhance students' performance on the listening tests. On these grounds, the current study was set out to explore the awareness of English majors towards the effectiveness of employing test-taking strategies in their listening tests, to identify the frequently used test-taking strategies by English majored students and to provide implications for teaching and learning listening, especially, how to do the listening test well.

Research questions

The study attempts to answer two research questions: 1) What are English majors' awareness of employing test-taking strategies for English listening tests? and 2) What test-taking strategies are frequently employed by English majors to do listening tests?

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Strategies and Test-taking Strategies

In a broad sense, strategies, according to Brown (1994), are particular procedures of approaching a task, methods of operating to accomplish a particular goal, deliberated cognitive construction for managing information. Oxford (1990, p. 2) referred strategies to some alternative terminologies used within the educational field in general, such as "learning skills, learning-to-learn skills, thinking skills, and problem-solving skills". On a flipped side, Macaro (2001) viewed strategies as alternative methods that learners incorporate to surmount obstacles in language learning by virtue of their inadequate language knowledge. In other words, test-taking strategies are the "test-taking process which the respondents have selected and which they are conscious of, at least to some degree" (Cohen, 1992, p. 102). Two fundamental components need take into consideration within the concept of test-taking strategies are consciousness and goal-orientation.

From the synthesis of the definitions of strategies and test-taking strategies above, this study defines test-taking strategies as the test-taking processes in which test-takers consciously select listening test items.

Test-taking strategies for the listening skill

Cohen and Dörnyei (2002) presented a method of classifying strategies by skill areas. Listening strategies were highlighted among the four fundamental skill categories, including: receptive skills (listening and reading), and productive skills (speaking and writing). In addition, Wilson (2008) identified the strategies that high proficiency level listeners employ and grouped those strategies into three primary areas: cognitive strategies, metacognitive strategies, and social-affective strategies. This classification is similar to the taxonomy by Oxford (1990) as presented in the following part.

Taxonomies of language learning strategies

Regarding classifying strategies as focusing on the learning or the use of language, Cohen (2011, p. 305) regarded test-taking strategies as an "umbrella" term that can be categorized

into three kinds: language learner strategies, test-management strategies, and test-wisness strategies. Another approach to clarify learning strategies takes metacognitive components into account proposed by Bachman and Palmer (1996). Strategies, in this case, can be used interchangeably with the term of strategic competence, which is regarded as “higher-order executive processes that provide a cognitive management function in language use, as well as in other cognitive activities” (p. 70).

Oxford's (1990) taxonomy of language learning strategies is taken into consideration in this research as a reference. Oxford (1990) clarified strategies orientating towards the broader goal of communicative competence. This strategy system is commented to be more thorough, detailed, and associated with both receptive and production skills (Oxford, 1990). Following Oxford's (1990) sort of classification, strategies comprise two main subcategories: direct and indirect. Direct strategies are strategies that directly incorporate the target language and necessitate mental processing of the language. Three major groups of direct strategies are memory, cognition, and compensation. Indirect strategies are those aiding the language learning process without explicitly include the target language. Indirect strategies are claimed to be effectively utilized in four language skills: listening, reading, speaking, and writing. Three subgroups of this strategy encompass: metacognitive, affective, and social.

Previous studies

Studies on the topic of test-taking strategies have been carried out in other countries. For example, Fini (2016) conducted a study to identify the preferable listening strategies among sixty Iranian female learners in the context of integrating multiple forms of media. A standardized test was employed to determine students' proficiency levels. Also, listening strategies questionnaires concerning metacognitive, cognitive, and social affective strategies were included through pre-test and post-test phases. The results revealed that metacognitive strategy was the most utilized, followed by social-affective strategies.

Razmalia and Gani's (2017) study identified the strategies proposed by Phillips (2001) among thirty-one students at tertiary level. After analyzing the assigned questionnaires, the researchers argued that the highest employment strategy is listening for expressions of uncertainty and suggestion. Another study was done by Bulushi et al. (2018) who conducted quasi-experimental research to examine the impact of strategy use on Omani high school students in listening comprehension tests. This study revealed that a significant correlation between learners' improvement in the listening comprehension tests and the use of strategies was discovered.

In the context of Vietnam, the study by Ngo (2015) investigated students' listening strategies in varied tasks and situations. Thirty students from a university in Vietnam were involved in discovering what, how, and why EFL Vietnamese learners used listening strategies. The finding revealed that social/affective strategies were most chosen by learners, followed by metacognitive and cognitive strategies respectively. Tran's (2016)

research examined the use of learning strategies, however, in preparation for the standardized test: TOEIC listening test with 110 participants from non-English majored students to find out the obstacles they encounter in listening both in general and in preparation for the TOEIC listening test in particular. The finding in this study regarded cognitive strategies as the most frequently implemented listening strategies. Regarding listening skills, particularly in the Vietnamese context, the related research (Ngo, 2015 & Tran, 2016) was mainly concerned with examining learning strategies.

The review of the related previous studies reveals that strategies in the process of test-taking listening by university students, especially, English majors, have not been highlighted over the years in the Vietnamese context. The purposes of this study accordingly are to identify second-year English majors' perception of employing test-taking strategies and to determine their most utilized test-taking strategies in English listening tests.

3. METHODOLOGY

Both quantitative and qualitative approaches were adopted in this study, given the fact that each approach has its own limitation and a combination of the two approaches will enhance the study's robustness.

Participants

Several methods can be employed to determine the sample size. This research chose a simplified formula for proportions proposed by Yamane (1967). Yamane's (1967) formula to calculate sample sizes as follows:

$$n = \frac{N}{1+N(e)^2}$$

Where n is the sample size, N is the population size, and e is the level of precision. When this formula is applied with $e= 0,05$, the sample size is 242.

The 242 students were studying in the second year and majoring in English at a university in Vietnam. Their ages ranged from 19 to 20 years old. In their second year at university, they studied most required subjects in English skills and listening was one among those courses. They were quite familiar with the listening tests and have taken this test for several times.

Data collection instruments

Data-collecting instruments employed in this research were questionnaire and interview. Details of the two instruments are described in the following section.

Questionnaire

To collect data for the current study, a questionnaire consisting of three clusters was delivered to the students after they had taken the English listening tests. The first cluster of the questionnaire aimed to gather some background information of the students. The second one sought to collect information related to students' perception of test-taking

strategies for their listening tests. The third cluster of the questionnaire was designed and adapted from Bulushi et al. (2018) (based on Oxford, 1990) to investigate students' use of test-taking strategies. A total of 242 questionnaire completed by the participants were collected for data analysis.

Interview

The interview questions in this study included three major parts. To minimize the discomfort and unwillingness to report accurate feelings of the interviewees, the questions in the first part were designed to establish rapport between the researcher and the interviewees. Besides, some leading questions were delivered to facilitate participants' viewpoints. Part two targeted at determining students' awareness towards the implementation of test-taking strategies in listening tests. The ultimate part emphasized identifying the test-taking strategies which were used frequently by the participants. Ten students volunteered to take part in the interview in Vietnamese and last about 15 minutes. The interviews were recorded for data analysis.

Data analysis

The quantitative data were analyzed by using a Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) version 20th, focusing on two main clusters: students' perceptions towards the use of test-taking strategies in listening tests and the most frequently employed strategies while taking listening tests. With regard to the reliability of the questionnaire, Cronbach Alpha was performed for all 36 items. With the Cronbach Alpha value of 0.936, this result indicated the items had high internal consistency. Another method to establish the validity of this research was delivering the pilot study to a group of ten students since pilot tests aid initial detection of potential flaws in the instruments by recognizing possible issues and areas that may require adjustment (Gani et al., 2020). Data from the interviews were examined thoroughly and coded in themes and subthemes of strategies in doing English listening tests.

4. FINDINGS

Second-year English majors' awareness of employing listening test-taking strategies

Data obtained from the questionnaire completed by 242 students are presented in Table 1.

As can be seen from Table 1, the mean score of this cluster closely approaching value 4 indicates that most participants advocated for the favorable contributions of employing listening test-taking strategies concerning performance, comprehension, concentration, and anxiety management. Items 1 and 2 have the mean score of 4,08 and 4.01, respectively, illustrating that most students found employing strategies in listening tests fundamental to improve test performance and better perceive the listening test content. Regarding the other two aspects, from participants' perspective, listening test-taking strategies are more likely to help them focus ($M= 3,95$) than lower their sense of anxiety ($M=3,77$).

In order to attain information on students' awareness of employing test-taking strategies, two interview questions were addressed during the interview: "Do you think employing test-taking strategies is necessary?" and "What impacts do test-taking strategies have on your listening tests?". The majority of the interviewed participants conceive of the positive impacts that employing strategies has on their listening tests generally. This result is consistent with the finding ($M=3,95$) from questionnaire indicating students' agreement on the beneficial influence of employing listening test-taking strategies.

Table 1. *Students' perception of employing listening test-taking strategies*

Statement (n=242)	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	SD
1. Employing test-taking strategies for English listening tests is necessary to achieve a good score/mark.	1	5	4,08	,846
2. Employing test-taking strategies for English listening tests helps me better understand what I am listening to.	1	5	4,01	,830
3. Employing test-taking strategies for English listening tests helps me more concentrate while taking the listening tests.	1	5	3,95	,850
4. Employing test-taking strategies for English listening tests helps me to reduce anxiety while taking the listening tests.	1	5	3,77	,969
Average	2	5	3,95	0,68

The frequency of test-taking strategies reported to be used by second-year English majors

Data from 242 completed questionnaires are presented in the following table:

Table 2. *The mean scores of listening test-taking strategies*

Cluster	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	SD
Memory strategies	242	1	5	3.66	1,0175
Cognitive strategies	242	1	5	3.79	1,0337
Compensation strategies	242	1	5	3.66	1,0057
Metacognitive strategies	242	1	5	3.88	,9914
Affective strategies	242	1	5	3.55	1,1429
Social strategies	242	1	5	3.63	,9836

As demonstrated in Table 0.2, the mean value of all six categories is higher than 3,55, revealing that most students expressed their preference for employing all these sorts of

strategies while tackling listening tests. Out of all the proposed strategies, metacognitive strategies obtain the highest mean score ($M= 3,88$), tightly followed by cognitive strategies with the mean of 3,79. Memory strategies and compensation strategies are equally employed by the participants with the same mean score of 3,66. The least frequently utilized strategy among all the above strategies is the affective cluster; nevertheless, the mean score of this cluster is relatively high (above 3,5), suggesting the affective strategies are occasionally adopted by most students.

All the participants described their employment of listening strategies when inquired, “Do you use any strategies when taking listening tests?” and “What types of strategies do you employ in listening tests?” For example, below is an extract from one interview with student A:

I highlight the keywords of the questions before listening and find out the answers based on the keywords I hear in the audio. The second and paramount important point is that all the listening questions have to be acquired before listening, or you will end up missing related information for the tests. I rarely either associate the content of the listening with the mental images or the sound.

The student said that she employed various kinds of strategies except for some memory strategies like visualization and auditory imagery. By contrast, student B in another interview was favorable to this memory strategy as she stated, “I tend to connect the whole listening content to generate the mental picture as complete as possible.” While student A considered not utilizing translation as a strategy, student B additionally mentioned that her auto-pilot mind would convert English into Vietnamese most of the time. Student C shared the similar view that “translating into my mother tongue is my frequent routine.” Other students responded yes to converting into Vietnamese; the methods they employ, however, are pretty distinctive. For instance, student D tended to convert all related information of the audio she expects to reflect and remember to mother tongue solely in the final phase; or, in the case of student F, she put corresponding Vietnamese interpretation for the test options or questions. Student G held an extreme opinion of translation as a strategy for not translating any information during listening tests.

Some other strategies are provided by the participants as follows:

Before listening, I read carefully and try to understand the requirements of each listening task. I normally highlight the key information needed for each question. (Student C)

Before listening, I thoroughly decode the listening questions and highlight some key information. When it comes to new words, I try to guess their meanings based on contexts or part of speech of the words. (Student D)

I determine the keywords of the listening options and highly pay attention if they appear in the audio. (Student F)

I take note of the related words right next to the listening questions and options, then comparing information before reaching the decision. I also have the pronunciation of words in my mind when reading the test questions and options. (Student H)

Overall, the reported test-taking strategies by students are varied, but sometimes there are some overlapping responses. For instance, “highlight the keywords” is what students C, D, F, and student H mentioned. Additionally, the interviewed participants said that they employed the strategy of clarifying the purpose of listening tests.

Discussion of the research findings

The key findings of the current study reveal that, in general, most participants held a positive view of applying test-taking strategies in listening tests in four areas: test performance, listening comprehension, degree of concentration, and anxiety. This result is in accordance with Pour-Mohammadi and Zainol Abidin (2012) who indicated that participants showed a positive response in terms of relaxation, efficient prediction, time management, and reading test enhancement. Besides, the findings from the questionnaire reiterate the strategies for taking listening tests pointed out by Wilson (2008) which included such primary areas as cognitive strategies, metacognitive strategies, and social-affective strategies. Responses from interviews somehow support the constructive roles of employing strategies in listening tests.

Notably, according to the students, employing test-taking strategies influenced most their test doing among all four provided aspects: test performance, comprehension, concentration, or anxiety. Compared with several prior studies investigating the relationship between strategy use in language skills and test results, the findings of the current study have not indicated the specific relationships between listening test scores and the use of test taking strategies. The current study however just targeted at the perceptions and use of test taking strategies.

Another finding of the current study is that adopting test-taking strategies is least influenced by students' anxiety in listening tests compared with test performance, understanding, and concentration. The data from the interview indicated similar results. In the interviews, solely one participant considered implementing strategies to help combat the sense of anxiety; the other seven did not consider lowering anxiety to have positive impact on taking the listening tests.

In addition, this study's findings show that metacognitive strategies gained the highest mean score among the six clusters, indicating that students were most favorable of employing metacognitive strategies. In the same vein, the students reported the strategies they commonly adopted, including clarifying the purposes of the listening tests, which belong to the metacognitive cluster. Of all the 36 strategies, strategy "before listening, I highlight the keywords of the listening tests by underlining or circling" (item 6) had the highest mean score, which reflected that most students paid attention to figure out the critical information in the pre-listening phase.

Another finding originating from the interview worth noticing is the employment of translation as a strategy. In greater detail, participants held opposing views of using the mother tongue in listening tests.

5. CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

This study was carried out with the aims to explore second-year English majors' perceptions of listening test taking strategies and their reported employment of the strategies during the tests. Overall, most students displayed favorable attitudes toward the employment of test-taking strategy in listening tests in terms of test outcome, listening comprehension, level of concentration, and anxiety. Of all the four presented aspects, employing test-taking strategies, from the point of view of second-year students, impacted most the listening test performance, whereas the degree of anxiety tended to be least influenced by utilizing test-taking strategies.

Regarding the common implementation of strategies in listening tests, among the six groups of strategies that adopted Oxford's (1990) taxonomy, metacognitive strategies were mostly employed among the five other clusters. The qualitative data from the interviews assisted in validating the most frequent use of metacognitive strategies. Out of the 36 strategies in three phases: before, during, and after listening, the strategy "highlight the keywords of the listening tests by underlining or circling" in the pre-listening stage was the most popular strategy employed by students.

Ultimately, the employment of switching to the mother tongue while taking listening tests as a strategy, from the standpoint of interviewed students, appeared to receive the inconsistent approval from the students. In contrast, others held a divergent view omitting the conversion into Vietnamese.

From the study findings, the following implications are put forward. First, the understanding of which test-taking strategies employed by students assists teachers in figuring out whether students employ unexpected strategies merely based on, for instance, intuition or educated guesses. In light of this, teachers can relate this knowledge to design listening tests. In addition, teachers can equip students with a list of "should do" strategies to help students enhance their test performance. Second, the findings concerning participants' awareness of employing test-taking strategies suggest that strategies could be taken advantage of in order to enhance test performance, listening comprehension, concentration, and lower test anxiety. The proposed strategies in the three phases from this finding might serve as a reference for students in their listening tests. The frequent use of metacognitive strategies suggests it might be constructive in developing students learning process to practice thinking and critically reflect their learning process.

Most previous researches concentrate on learning strategies; therefore, further experimental investigations are needed to investigate the use of test-taking strategies in all four language skills: listening, reading, speaking, and writing. Additionally, further studies in the context of Vietnam should address the relationship between adopting test-taking strategies and other aspects, including test performance and anxiety.

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